Great Prayers of the Bible

Charles M. Laymon

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BY

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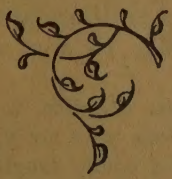

Woman's Division of Christian Service
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CHARLES M. LAYMON was born and reared at Dayton, Ohio. His ancestors were Methodists for many generations, even as far back as the days of Bishop Francis Asbury, who preached often in one of their homes.

Mr. Laymon received his college training at Ohio Wesleyan University; New College, Edinburgh, Scotland; and Boston University School of Theology, where he earned the degrees of Bachelor of Sacred Theology and Doctor of Theology in New Testament. He has taught Bible at Ohio Wesleyan University; Union College, Kentucky; and is now professor of Literature and History of the Bible at Scarritt College, Nashville, Tennessee. For a time he served as pastor of St. Paul's Methodist Church at Delaware, Ohio. He is a member of the Ohio Conference.

There are three children in the Laymon household, two sons who are nine and twelve years of age, and a young daughter of two.

A frequent contributor to the religious press, Mr. Laymon finds pleasure in writing; however, his greatest interest is in teaching the eager Scarritt students, who are preparing to interpret the meaning of the Kingdom of God at home and abroad for our time.

To Lillian Christina, my wife, whose understanding of these deep things of the Spirit has been an inspiration in the writing of this book.

PREFACE

Our study begins with the prayers of the patriarchs. These men were the "founding fathers" of the Hebrew people. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are familiar names to all of us. Their thoughts and deeds should be regarded as typical, not only of themselves as individuals, but also of tribes and other groups of people. For instance, the story of Esau is the story of the Edomites, the tales of Jacob are the tales of Israel as a whole, and the exploits of Ishmael are one with those of the Ishmaelites.

Dates must be regarded broadly in this early period. Abraham should be placed probably in the seventeenth century B. C., although he has sometimes been dated earlier than this. Our information regarding the patriarchs comes from stories that circulated orally for many centuries before being written down. They were put into writing between 850 and 397 B. C.[1] by enthusiastic and devout scribes who sought to inspire the people through making available the dramatic tales of the nation's early heroes.

The reader will find many of the great prayers of

[1] For the account of this literary history the reader is referred to the article, "The Pentateuch—Its Origin and Development," by Frederick C. Eiselen, in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*. (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1929), pp. 134-144.

the Bible printed in the chapters of this book.[2] They are not to be regarded as illustrative material, intended to enlighten a comment of the author, therefore to be passed over hurriedly. Instead, they are the most important part of the book. The words which precede or follow these prayers are intended to illuminate them, to bring out their meaning and significance. They are in no sense a substitute for the prayers themselves.

The questions which are found at the close of each chapter are intended to bring to light the significant truths of the chapter. When answered, they should provide a helpful outline for the leader who is reviewing the book. It is intended that they should result in a rethinking of the subject, not in a mere recalling of what was written about it.

I wish to express deep appreciation to Rollin H. Walker for his great interest in the writing of this book and for the helpful suggestions which he made in the preparation of the manuscript. Gratitude is also due to the authors and publishers whose works are quoted.

CHARLES M. LAYMON

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[2] Quotations from the Old Testament are taken from The American Standard Version of the Revised Bible, while those from the New Testament are to be found in the recently issued Revised Standard Version of the New Testament. Permission for their use was courteously granted by the International Council of Religious Education, owners of the copyright.

IN THE BEGINNING

As long as there has been religion, there has been prayer. Instinctively man has reached out to make contact with that "something beyond" which he worshipped. Whether he regarded this object of devotion with fear, reverence, or affection, it was a relationship which he craved, and prayer as a means of sustaining this relationship became a necessity. It may not have been prayer as you and I know it, but it was prayer just the same. A magical rite to ward off an evil spirit, an offering to the sun, a dance around the stump of a tree in order to impress the soul which the worshiper believed dwelt there—all this is rudimentary prayer.

As early man progressed in his thinking, however, his prayer life progressed likewise. When the gods came to be thought of as personal, prayer became personal and was addressed to a being, or beings who were thought of as having feelings and thoughts similar to those of man. This was an important step forward, for it opened the door to fellowship with a god that was satisfying to the human heart, and understood its language.

Sometimes these early men thought of their gods in terms that were too human. They were regarded as being jealous, pouty, revengeful, and even cruel. Time and experience, however, gave man a conception of a single divine Being who was righteous, just, and

loving. Praying to such a god as this was quite a different kind of experience from praying to a god who was filled with human faults and frailties. Prayer was transformed after the likeness of the character of the god to whom men prayed.

The Bible contains the story of man's growth in his understanding of God. A part of this story has to do with the prayers men offered. They too became more thoughtful and spiritual as the revelation of God increased and deepened from age to age. It will be our privilege to follow this record of the human heart in its prayer life, from the petitions of the patriarchs to the Christian prayers of the Early Church and Paul.

CONTENTS

Preface VII

In the Beginning IX

I. *The Prayers of the Patriarchs and Moses* . 1

II. *The Prayers of the Kings and Prophets* . 18

III. *The Prayers of the Psalmists* 40

IV. *The Prayers of Jesus* 65

V. *The Prayers of the Early Church* . . . 90

VI. *The Prayers of Paul* 109

Fulfilment 129

Chapter One

THE PRAYERS OF THE PATRIARCHS AND MOSES

IT IS difficult for us who live in weather-stripped houses to realize how rugged was the life of the ancient patriarchs of Israel. The tents in which they lived were sealed against neither the heat of the sun by day nor the cold of a damp Palestinian night. There were no "backyard gardens," and hot and cold water did not run from faucets at the kitchen sink. Moving day came whenever the pasture gave out or the water supply proved insufficient. There was no telling when it would come. Property deeds were not registered in courthouses; and a person's land was his own only as long as he could hold it against the swift attack of unfriendly tribes. The assurances and securities of life were most unsure and insecure. Yet people had to live, eat, love, and die. Their hopes and their fears went into these experiences, and where these are found, religion is found likewise. The religion and prayers of the patriarchs must be seen in just such a setting as this.

GREAT PRAYERS OF THE BIBLE

I

ABRAHAM PRAYS

Abraham, the first of the patriarchs, became the chief of a wandering tribe at the death of his father, Terah. Instead of settling down in Haran, where he was, he "broke camp" and set out for Canaan several hundred miles distant. Ordinarily, such moves were prompted by economic necessities, and the food factor may have played some part in this case, but the story points to a deeper cause—religion:

> Now Jehovah said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing.[1]

This was the reason for the move! A promise of blessing and a command to be a blessing were lodged in the heart of a man who had faith enough to believe in the moving intuitions of his own soul.

From the life of this great man two prayers are recorded. That there were others we can be sure, but only these two remain in our records. In the first prayer Abraham is not granted what he requests, namely that Ishmael, his son from Hagar, might be the one through whom Jehovah's promise would be fulfilled.

> And Abraham said unto God, *Oh that Ishmael might live before thee!*[2] (Italics mine.)

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[1] Gen. 12:1, 2.
[2] Gen. 17:18.

Abraham had just been told that his wife, the aged Sarah, would have a son. It seemed impossible, even ridiculous, because of their advanced years, so much so that Abraham fell on his face and laughed.[3] Ishmael, on the other hand, was a living fact, already born; let him be the one!

Abraham had to learn through prayer that the obvious is not always the providential. Jehovah had a plan for Ishmael, but Isaac the unborn son of Sarah was in his purpose also, and in a different manner. It is significant that Abraham does not seek to press his own desires here. He had prayed for what seemed to him to be right, but, through this same prayer, he had been told that Jehovah had even greater things in store. His case was like that of Columbus, who centuries later sought a new route to India but instead was granted a whole continent!

ABRAHAM AND LOT

Abraham was a great family man. It was important that family groups remain intact in those days as a safeguard against the extinction of the tribe. Abraham's affection for his own, however, went beyond this necessity. Especially was this true in regard to Lot, his nephew. When the territory in which they were living proved incapable of supporting them all, Abraham gave Lot his choice of residence, and Lot chose the rich Plain of the Jordan. The cities which sprang up in this valley became wicked, and Jehovah contem-

[3] Gen. 17:17.

plated bringing judgment upon them. The account states that Jehovah told Abraham of his intention, and this forms the background for the second recorded prayer of the patriarch.[4]

Abraham thought immediately of Lot. The story of his intercession for his nephew is one of the gems of Hebrew literature. How intimate is the conversation between Jehovah and Abraham! It begins with the great man's question: "Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked?" Then Abraham gets down to cases and inquires if Jehovah will save the city provided there are fifty righteous therein, then forty-five, then forty, twenty, and finally, ten, which number was sufficient to include Lot and his immediate family. The persistent, subtle way in which Abraham moves from question to question, each time decreasing the number, must not be taken lightly. The patriarch is deadly in earnest. He is pleading for the life of his kinsfolk. To be sure, he comes before Jehovah much as a servant would approach an oriental king, rather than as a son addressing his father. But these were distant days, and Jehovah was regarded quite naturally as a king. In his prayer Abraham is speaking the language of his time, even as we do in our own day and age.

The problem of the suffering of the righteous, brought about through the necessity of punishing the wicked, was of as much concern to Jehovah as to Abraham. It still is! With total war in the modern

[4] Gen. 18:22-33.

world it is one of the heart-rending problems that faces God. The main point of the story, however, is Abraham's concern for Lot and his moving plea for his kinsman. In prayer he thought of others. He is like a man who walks around with a portrait of his family in his pocket and who does not forget to show this picture to God.

ABRAHAM'S SERVANT PRAYS

When the time came for Isaac to marry, Abraham sent his servant back to Mesopotamia to seek a wife for his son from among his own people,[5] for he did not wish him to marry among the Canaanites. This was a great responsibility for the trusted slave, but being a romanticist at heart, he took the assignment with delight. In those days the entire household, including the slaves, chose the religion of the master for their own. Sometimes this acceptance was more formal than real. This was not true, however, of the servant of Abraham. He believed devoutly in his master's God, and on this important mission prayed for the guidance of Jehovah. It is significant that these ancient worthies found a place for prayer in the selection of a life partner. Marriage was a "concern" for religion. Jehovah had a stake in the matter.

In praying for Jehovah's leading, the servant specifically told his God how he thought he should proceed, in informing him of his choice. Standing by the well he prayed:

[5] Gen. 24:1-67.

> . . . . let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast showed kindness unto my master.[6]

The account of how Rebekah came and acted in accordance with the servant's prayer, of the flurry and excitement in her household over the rich presents which the slave brought with him from Abraham, and of the departure for Canaan is full of interest and beauty. How impressive this story can be made for high-school students, especially the meeting of Isaac and Rebekah!

In the midst of all the excitement—wedding plans are always exciting—the servant does not forget to thank Jehovah for the happy turn of events!

> And the man bowed his head, and worshipped Jehovah. And he said, Blessed be Jehovah, the God of my master Abraham, who hath not forsaken his lovingkindness and his truth toward my master: as for me, Jehovah hath led me in the way to the house of my master's brethren.[7]

It would be easy to criticize the slave for laying down conditions in his prayer, for telling God how he should proceed. We feel that it is better to let God move in his own way. On the other hand, the servant's solid conviction that Jehovah would guide him in this important marital mission is worthy of our respect and emulation. In this prayer petition and gratitude are united, a practice we might well follow.

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[6]Gen. 24:14.
[7]Gen. 24: 26, 27.

II

JACOB AT BETHEL

From the union of Isaac and Rebekah two sons were born, Jacob and Esau. The boys were quite unlike each other in spite of their common parentage. Neither was particularly exemplary in character. Esau loved the life of the hunter. He was what we would call an outdoor man. Yet, he was unappreciative of the higher values of life, selling his birthright for a mess of pottage. Jacob, on the other hand, had a feeling for spiritual "intangibles" but was not above using unethical means to get them for himself. He seemed to know how to benefit from the weaknesses of others; in one case profiting from the fatigue of his brother and in another from the blindness of his father.

When the anger of Esau, whose blessing Jacob had obtained through pretense, caught up with Jacob, the lad fled from home, planning to go to Haran. Even a rascal grows discouraged under such circumstances, and Jacob arrived at Luz downhearted and disconsolate. Lying down on the ground for the night, with his head resting on a stone, he fell asleep, and a vision was given him in which he was told that the promise Jehovah had made to Abraham would be fulfilled through him. When he awoke he concluded that he had come upon the house of God because a vision had been granted him in this place. In prayer he made a vow to Jehovah, set up an altar, using the stone upon which his head was resting, and named the place Bethel.

It was the great religious experience of his life thus far, and out of it came a vow and a prayer. We usually think of prayers leading to religious experience, but here the experience led to a prayer:

> . . . , If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, and Jehovah will be my God, then this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.[8]

There is a kind of humility in this prayer, even though it seems as if Jacob is striking a bargain with Jehovah. Under the pressure of an impending tragedy men still make promises to God in prayer, if he will do such and such a thing which they desire. This is not the prayer of faith which commits all to God *whatever the outcome.* Of all the requests in this prayer, the petition to return home in peace is the most significant. Jacob the trickster is beginning to learn his lesson—but only beginning.

TWENTY YEARS LATER

It was twenty years before Jacob turned toward the home from which his brother's anger had driven him, twenty years of struggle. It must have seemed that Jehovah was taking a long time to answer his prayer. Now when all was going well, word reached him that his brother Esau was coming to meet him, accompanied by four hundred men. The past was catching up with him; all that he had acquired would be lost before the

[8]Gen. 28:20-22.

anger of an outraged Esau. Jacob thought first of certain tricks to appease his brother, sent gifts ahead, and planned pretty speeches. Deep within, however, he knew that these would not do and turned in prayer to the God who had spoken to him at Bethel.

The experience of prayer which Jacob had at this crisis in his life is represented symbolically by the account of his wrestling with an angel.[9] All night long they were at it, but Jacob would not give up until he had won a victory: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" was his prayer. It was the struggle of a man who was purging his life of low motives and base desires. Jacob was discovering a new humility in the presence of Jehovah. Prayer had provided a battle ground for his soul. He was having it out with himself and his God. Next morning he saw the sun as though it had shone for the first time.

Little wonder that Jacob's name was changed to Israel, meaning a prince of God, as a result of this victory in prayer. A kind of new birth had taken place, and a new name was now appropriate. The place of prayer had become the place of rebirth and has been such many times since Jacob wrestled with the angel at the ford of Jabbok. A prayer experience such as this is timeless. Although it occurred centuries ago, so characteristic is it of the human spirit as it struggles to live up to God's moral demand, that the marks of age are not upon it.

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[9]Gen. 32:22-31.

III

PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

It is interesting to note that although Joseph is the most nearly ideal character among the patriarchs, no mention is made of his prayer life, and no recorded prayers are attributed to him. However, the stories concerning this man and his work are permeated with a sense of the hand of God in the events which occurred. Divine providence is the warp and woof of Joseph's experience. In fact, the central message of his life is the reality of God's guidance in and through tragic happenings. This unbroken sense of God's presence must have seemed to the writers of these tories a kind of continual prayer-communion, and i. there were any specific prayers in the tradition they were recording, they passed them by.

IV

THE WORK OF MOSES

Although the Jews called themselves the children of Abraham, they were no less the children of Moses. Had the scattered fugitives from Pharaoh's court found no leader who could give them a sense of belonging "together" as well as of belonging to God, the wilderness would have swallowed them up. It is to Moses that the Old Testament credits this achievement.

Like the stories of the patriarchs, the narratives

concerning the work of Moses come to us from several sources and were written at different times before being combined in the form in which we now have them. Moses' date, in broad terms, is around 1250 B.C. Some of the accounts of his life were written as early as 850 B.C. while others are as late as 500 B.C. In this review of the prayers of Moses, we shall not indicate the date of the material used but regard it as presenting a single portrait viewed from different angles.

THE PRAYERS OF MOSES

The prayers of Moses are rich and varied. Like those of the patriarchs they are closely geared into the experiences through which he and his people were passing. All prayer, if it is real and effective, grows spontaneously out of the defeats, hopes, joys, and sorrows of the immediate present. Thus it was with Moses. As tremendous issues faced him, he prayed for the presence of Jehovah, for the forgiveness of his people, and for understanding.

Take, if you will, Moses' prayers for the people. As their leader he stood midway between Jehovah and their waywardness. Surrounded by great hardships, they were moved deeply by the temptation to idol worship. To follow an *unseen* God was difficult in the face of so many *seen* dangers. Indeed, while Moses was on the mount in communion with Jehovah, the people induced Aaron to make a golden calf. Jehovah was incensed at this disloyalty.

> . . . , I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people: now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, ...[10]

To Moses, the man who would not let God alone, this was unthinkable. He took his stand before Jehovah and prayed for the people. What an interesting prayer it is![11] He argued that if the Hebrews were destroyed Jehovah would appear ridiculous in the eyes of the Egyptians who would say:

> For evil did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?[12]

Surely Jehovah would not wish such a reputation as this. Then Moses presses deeper into the heart of the matter. What would happen to Jehovah's promise to Abraham, if the people were destroyed?

> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever.[13]

Shortly after this, Moses prayed again for the forgiveness of the people, with the true spirit of greatness.

> Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.[14]

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[10] Exod. 32: 9, 10.
[11] Exod. 32:11-13.
[12] Exod. 32:12.
[13] Exod. 32:13.
[14] Exod. 32:31, 32.

This is intercession after the manner of Jesus when he said in John's Gospel, "I lay down my life for the sheep."[15] Moses was willing himself to die if it would benefit the people. Seldom has prayer for others reached a higher level than this.

Some might choose to point out that in this situation Moses seems to be more loving than Jehovah. We must not forget, however, that God is responsible for upholding the moral order of the universe at the same time that it is his nature to be loving. Furthermore, punishment may be but the reverse side of love. Besides this, the story came to us from the hands of those who had not yet looked into the face of Jesus.

Again, Moses may be criticized for trying to change God's mind, but surely love has a right to plead for its own before God. In prayer we are dealing with a personal Reality and not a mechanical one. Like Jesus we must feel free to empty our hearts before the Father. But when all this has been done, like Jesus, again we shall say, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt." Not until we have bombarded heaven with our own desires and longings, however, are we able usually to make this final prayer of self-renunciation.

A PRAYER IN DESPONDENCY

Moses was capable of great heights of spirit; he was subject also to depths of depression. The two go hand in hand. Even our Lord who said, "Have faith in

[15] John 10:15.

God,"[16] also was known to have prayed, "My God. why . . . . ?"[17]

The hardships of desert life were unbearable often. It was not only that comforts were lacking, but also that the bare necessities of life were missing. They said:

> Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt for nought; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic: but now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all save this manna to look upon.[18]

Evidently, God's providence during these wilderness days was not luxurious. There are times when men need to be brought down to the simplest of living, and to realize that these plain items of daily need come from the hand of God. In any case, the disquietude of the people, their complaints and grievances had troubled Moses and were most irritating. In a moment of desperation his pent-up burden spilled over into a revealing prayer.[19] He asks why Jehovah had treated him thus, pointing out that the people belonged to Jehovah and not to him:

> Have I conceived all this people? have I brought them forth, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing-father carrieth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers? . . . . I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me.[20]

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[16]Mark 11:22.
[17]Matt. 27:46.
[18]Num. 11:4-6.
[19]Num. 11:11-15.
[20]Num. 11:12, 14.

Before closing his prayer Moses asks God to take away his life if the burden cannot be lightened.

Could this be the prayer of the same man who had once offered to die if his death would benefit the people, the very same people who now constitute an unbearable responsibility? Yes, it is the same man and his prayer, and both his prayers are the prayers of great leaders of people throughout all time. These two prayers, the one to die *for* the people and the other to die *in order to get away from them,* do not cancel each other. Together they portray the strength and the weakness of man. Moses is our kind of person, and his prayers are of the sort that help us in our responsibilities. It should be noted that as a result of this desperate prayer, release of soul and new insight came to Moses. At the suggestion of Jehovah, seventy elders were appointed to assist him in his work. An earlier version of the outcome states that Jehovah made preparation also for improving the diet of the people.[21]

A PRAYER FOR THE PRESENCE

Of all the prayers which man can make, none is greater than the prayer for a realization of the presence of God. In his presence is power, peace, and understanding. As Moses contemplated moving into the Promised Land, he felt that he could not proceed unless the presence of Jehovah accompanied him. Better the wilderness and its deprivations wherein God has revealed himself, than a rich land without him.

[21] Num. 11:18-23.

> If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. For wherein now shall it be known that I have found favor in thy sight, I and thy people? is it not in that thou goest with us, so that we are separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth? . . . . Show me, I pray thee, thy glory.[22]

Moses was told that the full glory of Jehovah was beyond his understanding. His goodness, however, he might see and know. In a suggestive and, surely to us, a symbolical way, Moses was allowed to look only upon the back of God's head,[23] and not upon his face. What a parable this is! We are to sense the presence of God in his goodness and mercy which attend us here. The full vision must wait until we see him "face to face." One cannot but comment that the hope of the continuous presence of God, such as Moses was expressing as he contemplated the journey to the strange, new land, is the strength of the missionary who, at home or abroad, leaves familiar surroundings to live among people of different background, customs, and culture.[24]

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[22] Exod. 33:15, 16, 18.

[23] Exod. 33:20-23.

[24] Other prayers of Moses not treated in this study but worthy of consideration are to be found in Exodus 5:22, 23; Numbers 12:13; 14:13-19; 16:20-24; Deuteronomy 3:23-28.

Helps for Study

1. Make a list of the wide variety of blessings sought in these prayers of the patriarchs. If you care to, you may list them in the order of importance with which they impress you.

2. Note the variety of circumstances and conditions under which these men prayed.

3. What do you find in these prayers that, in your judgment, would be especially valuable for today, considering the broad difference between the modern world and the rough, hardy days of the patriarchs?

4. Turn to the Bible and read carefully one of the prayer-stories of the patriarchs until the beauty of the narrative impresses you. The Bible invariably expresses great truth in dramatic and moving literature.

5. In your study can you detect any relationship between the personality of the man praying and the type of prayer he prays? Explain your reply.

6. Regardless of the fact that no prayers of Joseph are recorded in Genesis, is it your opinion that he could have forgiven his brothers who had so greatly wronged him if he had not been a praying man?

7. Compare Abraham's intercession for Lot (Gen. 18:23-32) with Moses' prayer for the children of Israel (Exod. 32:7-14, 31, 32). Judged by its sacrificial spirit, which was the greater prayer?

8. How long do you think that Moses could have continued to lead the Hebrews under such difficult circumstances had he not been able to unburden his heart in prayer to Jehovah?

Chapter Two

THE PRAYERS OF THE KINGS AND PROPHETS

I

KINGS IN ISRAEL

IT IS interesting to follow the development of government in the Old Testament. In the beginning the patriarch ruled over his tribe, making the decisions, granting the blessings, and caring for the needs of the people. Later, men such as Moses and Joshua assumed leadership over a number of tribes. This took the people one step further in the development of national consciousness. During the period of the Judges, while the several tribes were settling down among the Canaanites in scattered groups, there was a danger that this sense of national consciousness would be lost. What kept this from happening was the coming forth of heroic men to meet local threats to the existence of some one of these groups. These intrepid leaders were known as *judges*, and they called frequently on the

other tribes of Israel to come to the rescue of their particular groups.[1]

Samuel might be called the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. He seemed to exert considerable influence upon the people as the several tribes achieved a foothold in Canaan. With the strengthening of this foothold, the desire for a king to rule over the nation was felt. National consciousness had reached a point where a king to lead the nation was the next logical step.[2] It was Samuel who anointed Saul to become the first king.

Kings in Israel were not regarded by the seers of the nation as ruling in their own right. Jehovah was the true king; the one who sat on an earthly throne was responsible to him. We call this rule a theocracy. It is necessary to realize this aspect of kingship if we are to appreciate the prayers of the kings.

DAVID PRAYS[3]

The greatest king of Israel was David. His early

[1] In Judges, Chapter 5, Deborah sings of an exploit of one of these groups, praising some of the tribes who came to give aid, and accusing others of refusing to help. It represents heroic literature at its best.

[2] There are two schools of thought in the Old Testament regarding the advisability of this step. One represents Samuel as favoring it (I Sam. 9:1—10:16); the other suggests that the choice of a king was disloyal to Jehovah and would place great burdens upon the people (I Sam. 8:4-22; 10:17-27).

[3] As in the case of the patriarchs and Moses, so here in the prayers of the kings and preliterary prophets we are concerned with not only the faith and word of the tradition, but also with the religious conviction of the inspired writer.

life reminds us of the celebrated Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest. A man of strong feeling combined with imagination and daring, he won the admiration of the nation even before he became king. His life was tumultuous, filled with startling successes and stunning griefs. It is enough to say that his rule became a symbol of that of the Messiah himself, so that when men down through the years thought of the messianic Kingdom, they pictured it as an idealized Davidic kingdom.

There are several recorded prayers of David found in the historical books of the Old Testament.[4] The prayer which we shall consider was offered in connection with the king's desire to build a temple to Jehovah.[5] The palace had been built and the ark, which, to the people, had become the symbol (if not the actual fact) of Jehovah's presence, had been brought to Jerusalem. But whereas the king dwelt in a house of cedar, the ark was housed in a tent. David felt conscience-bound to do better than this for Jehovah and consulted Nathan the prophet concerning his proposal to build a temple. At first Nathan favored David's plan, but at night he was informed by Jehovah that he should not approve. The prophet was to tell David, however, that Jehovah would make him a greater king and his people into a kingdom forever:

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[4] David prays for the people, that they suffer not for his own sin in taking a census (II Sam. 24:17). He offers a prayer of thanksgiving for the willing offerings given toward the building of the Temple (I Chron. 29:10 ff.).

[5] II Sam. 7:18-29.

> I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son: if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men; but my lovingkindness shall not depart from him, ...[6]

It was in response to Jehovah's promise to make of David a great nation, that David prayed this prayer of thanksgiving. The prayer is filled with a sense of history and the glory of a great promise. Little wonder! David had offered to undertake what he felt was a worthy cause for so great a God. Jehovah had replied that *he* would do a gracious thing for David instead. What a God is this!

David begins his prayer with a note of humility:

> Who am I, O Lord Jehovah, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?[7]

Here is recognition of the providential care of God in his life up to this time. Such gratitude cleanses the heart of small thoughts and introduces perspective. In the light of the years man's vision improves where prayer is concerned. Such praying brings home to the soul a sense of the greatness of God. It was even thus with David, for he continues:

> Wherefore thou art great, O Jehovah God: for there is none like thee, neither is there any God besides thee, ... And now, O Lord Jehovah, thou art God, and thy words are truth, and thou hast promised this good thing unto thy servant.[8]

From thoughts of the greatness of God, David turns to an appreciation of the greatness of God's people. How

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[6] II Sam. 7:13*b*-15.
[7] II Sam. 7:18.
[8] II Sam. 7:22, 28.

true this is of the understanding which a prayer of this kind brings. One cannot think great thoughts concerning God and, in the same hour, mean and limiting thoughts regarding man. David prays:

> And what one nation in the earth is like thy people, even like Israel, whom God went to redeem unto himself for a people, ... And thou didst establish to thyself thy people Israel to be a people unto thee for ever.[9]

The nation took this prayer of David to its heart. Through days dark and desolate it remembered, and always there were some few who lighted the torches of their faith at its flame, when the extinction of the nation seemed at hand. Perhaps in our day when intense, ingrown nationalisms have wrought such havoc, one could criticize the prayer as being too nationalistic. We must take note, however, that there is a type of nationalism which benefits the world because it holds a high view of the nation's origin, mission, and destiny. A prayer for our own nation after the manner of David's utterance here would not be out of order at the present time, when we are called upon to play such a responsible part in the reconstruction of the world order.

SOLOMON PRAYS

At David's death Solomon, his son, succeeded him as king. His prayer for wisdom is a familiar one to most Christians. As a matter of fact, it is not a prayer in the ordinary sense, because Solomon made the petition in the midst of a vision which came to him at

[9] II Sam. 7:23, 24.

Gibeon, after he had offered a thousand burnt offerings upon the altar there. It is essentially a prayer, however, for it represents a petition directed to Jehovah.

It was at the beginning of his rule that Solomon went to Gibeon, and the purpose of the visit was to seek Jehovah's help in the new responsibilities which he had assumed as king. Accordingly, when told by God to ask what he desired, he said:

> O Jehovah my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child; I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give thy servant therefore an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to judge this thy great people?[10]

As in the prayer of David which we have already studied, the zeal and concern of this petition is directed toward the life of the nation Israel. It is not to be thought that Solomon was literally a child; the import seems to be that he felt like a child as he faced the magnitude of the task ahead of him. How like Moses, who preceded him,[11] and Jeremiah, who followed several centuries later.[12] What Solomon was requesting was the ability to discern what is just and true. In asking for wisdom he was not praying for what we mean by knowledge resulting from a college education, although it is to be hoped that proper college training will make for insight and discernment. One of the

[10] I Kings 3:7-9.
[11] Exod. 4:10.
[12] Jer. 1:6, 7.

functions of a king in those days was to be a judge over his people, and soon after this prayer and Jehovah's assurance that his petition would be granted, Solomon had an opportunity to test his wisdom in deciding the true parentage of an infant which two mothers claimed to have borne.[13]

When Jehovah commented on this prayer of Solomon's, he said that it pleased him because the king had asked for "understanding to discern justice" rather than for long life, riches, and the life of his enemies. This statement is a mirror wherein we can see ourselves and our own prayers.

It would not be extreme to say that throughout the Church many people are still praying for *things* rather than for such spiritual values as wisdom, courage, and faith. Solomon's prayer comes as a challenge to materialistic-centered petitions. It is true, however, that some things, such as hymnbooks, a piano, and a new medical laboratory, may contain great spiritual potentialities for lifting the life of a mission station, and certainly it would not be amiss to pray for them. One can see, likewise, how a new automobile could facilitate greatly in a worker's moving from point to point on a rural circuit where his services were much needed. In cases such as these a prayer for things would not be materialistic, because the motive would be spiritual and unselfish. Here is the test, is it not?

Would that Solomon had been able to live up to his prayer! As the years went by, he became more and

[13] I Kings 4:16-28.

more interested in constructing a showy and lavish capital city. An extensive building program all but enslaved his own people, and a compromise with foreign religions weakened the moral fiber of the country. At his death the sub-structure of his reign was so termite-eaten that the nation could no longer hold together; it split asunder, dividing into a northern and a southern kingdom. One cannot but surmise that if Solomon had kept his prayer life on the spiritual plane represented in the prayer of his youth, which was for wisdom, the end of his reign would have been far different from what it was. Thus in the life of this one man we find both an ideal to be followed and a warning to be heeded.[14]

II

PROPHETS IN ISRAEL

The prophets are outstanding among biblical characters because of their capacity to understand and interpret in the light of God's character and purpose for life what was happening all around them. They became, therefore, the guardians of the conscience of the nation. Their prayers reflect this sensitiveness to God's will. To be sure, they do not always accept God's intention for the people or themselves "without a quibble." As in the case of Jeremiah they frequently protest vigorously, but they do not rebel finally to

[14] Cf. also Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in which he envisions the structure as a place of prayer (I Kings 8:23-53, 56-60).

God's command. It is in their prayer life that this struggle takes place. One thinks usually of the prophets as men who kept their ears open toward heaven. This they did, and it constituted the listening end of prayer. They also kept their lips open toward God. It would seem that they talked to him quite as much as he spoke to them.

STAGES IN PROPHECY

Prophecy did not burst upon the world in full bloom. As Jesus said of the Kingdom, there was first the blade, then the ear, and finally the full corn in the ear. At first the prophetic impulse expressed itself in the enthusiastic group of men known as the "sons of the prophets." Under great emotional seizure they would emit utterances which were regarded as prophetic. There was little critical thought or understanding here, but it was a beginning.

The second stage was represented by the work of the preliterary prophets such as Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. These were men of action who moved throughout the land as Jehovah's representatives, correcting, encouraging, warning, and serving both the kings and the people. When they were present, the Word of God was present *in them*. We call them preliterary prophets because they wrote out none of their prophecies. All that we know of them comes from stories written about their heroic exploits.

The third stage may be found in the literary prophets, from the eighth century down through the

exile in Babylon. They are known by this name because they put their messages into writing. We have their words in our Old Testament. Amos, Hosea, the Isaiahs, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel belong to this group. They did not specialize in predictions regarding the future, as is popularly believed, but pointed out what God was doing in current events. With them the religious thinking of the Hebrews reached its highest level. They represent the Shakespearean section of our Scriptures.[15]

ELIJAH PRAYS ON MOUNT CARMEL

Elijah was a colorful character. In a day when the worship of Jehovah was threatened by the local religions of Canaan, this prophet became a kind of lone champion of his God's cause. Believers in these other religions worshipped Baal,[16] the deity whose particular responsibility was supposed to be the care of crops. As this was an agricultural country, his influence was great. The issue was not, however, simply a matter of one God competing with another. Baal worship was highly immoral, and those who followed it became subject to gross sensuality. While some of the Hebrews "went all out" for Baal, others wanted to worship Jehovah after the manner of Baal. This would compromise Jehovah worship at its heart, a

[15] An excellent introduction to the prophets, their times and their work, may be found in *Prophetic Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1947), by J. P. Hyatt.

[16] Baal worship was polytheistic, each region or field having its own deity.

compromise which would strip from it the very garments of righteousness which made it unique. Elijah was sharp to see this and opposed the spread of Baalism with all his might. *One cannot worship a righteous God in an unrighteous manner.*

Always possessed of a flair for the dramatic, Elijah proposed a contest on Mt. Carmel between Jehovah and the local Baal. It was time, once and for all, to draw the line. Seldom has the call to cease all compromise been expressed more strongly than when Elijah said:

> How long go ye limping between the two sides? if Jehovah be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.[17]

To this the people answered not a word, and Elijah felt that he alone must bear the responsibility of the test, and bear it he would! The arrangements were simple: two altars with a bullock upon each and two prayers for fire to consume the offering. The God who answered by fire would be the true God.

Would that we could reproduce the story here in its original form.[18] There were the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal who, leaping about the altar, prayed all day, finally cutting themselves with knives in the hope that the sight of blood would persuade Baal to act. All the while Elijah was on the side lines heckling the priests. He was a one-man cheering section devoted to confuse the oppostion. Nothing happened! Evening came, and it was Elijah's turn. He was "all

[17]Kings 18:21.
[18]Cf. I Kings 18:20-40.

business" as he called the people to draw near and repaired the altar of Jehovah, which had been allowed to fall apart (from disuse?). To make the test conclusive, the prophet had twelve jars of water poured upon the offering, wood, and altar. A God who could start a fire under these circumstances would be God indeed. Sure that his God would stand up under the most rigorous test, Elijah prayed a prayer, a simple prayer in contrast to the wild cries of the priests of Baal:

> O Jehovah, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Jehovah, hear me, that this people may know that thou, Jehovah, art God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.[19]

Like Jesus who came after him, and who himself prayed simple prayers, Elijah knew that a man is not heard "for his much speaking."

How pictorially the author of this story describes what happened when Elijah prayed!

> Then the fire of Jehovah fell, and consumed the burnt-offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.[20]

Here was an answer without measure and without stint. One might have expected that the offering and the wood would be consumed, but hardly that the stones and the dust would be melted down.

As we interpret this story from the standpoint of what the Bible has to teach us concerning prayer, it

[19] I Kings 18:36, 37.
[20] I Kings 18:38.

would be unwise to conclude that God intends for us to light our fires by prayer rather than by matches and electric spark. Through experience we have learned that God's way for us to produce fire is by a patient application of the laws of physics. Furthermore, when it comes to the offering on Elijah's altar, we do not know by what physical process it was ignited. The author of the account was not a student of physics, and besides, this was not his purpose in recording the story. What he as an Oriental in religious feeling and as a great, imaginative literary artist desperately wanted to say was that the true God can be counted upon to answer prayer under most unfavorable circumstances, with an unforgettable and even lavish response.[21]

Any man who prays knows that there are occasions when the fire comes. They may be the times when the flame of a burning enthusiasm quickens us as we are tempted to become tepid. Again, as we stupidly grope for an answer to a perplexing problem, prayer may light the mind with a great illumination, and we know what to do. I cannot but compare the fire here on Mt. Carmel to the fire at Pentecost, when, after prayer, an experience of the returned presence of the living Christ fortified the Church to begin its evangelization of the world. Such great answers come only

[21] Other prayers of Elijah include his questioning of Jehovah concerning the death of the son of the widow who had befriended him. (I Kings 17:20), his request that life return unto the body of the widow's son (I Kings 17:21), and the occasion when under great fatigue and discouragement he asks God to let him die (I Kings 19:4).

when a man dares to ask *great gifts* from God, even as Elijah adventured to stake all on the outcome of his prayer. One would hesitate to ask a millionaire for fifty cents toward the building of a new church, lest he insult him; yet we persist in sending small prayers for small gifts to the God of all the universe and wonder why the fire does not fall.

ELISHA AND HIS SERVANT

There are occasions when men are despondent because everything seems to be stacked against them. It is as though the place were surrounded, all the doors and windows jammed, and the air in the room were stifling. Under such circumstances personality sometimes falls to pieces, and a nervous collapse follows. The servant of Elisha felt this way when he discovered that the Syrian enemy had surrounded the town of Dothan, where he and Elisha were, in an effort to capture the prophet.[22] "Alas, my master! how shall we do?" cried the servant.

Elisha knew the answer. "Fear not," he said, "for they that are with us are more than they that are with them." Fine talk this! It must have seemed nonsensical to the servant at a time when they were utterly defenseless. Then it was that the prophet prayed:

> Jehovah, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see.[23]

And it happened! The man's eyes were opened, and he saw the mountain round about, full of horses and

[22] II Kings 6:8-19.
[23] I Kings 6:17.

chariots of fire. These were the invisible host of Jehovah's vanguards. They were there all the time, but only the person of vision and faith could see them. Elisha's prayer had opened the servant's eyes to their presence. Herein lies a parable. In prayer we reach out into the unseen and lay hold of the presence of God. We learn by prayer that in every situation there are more resources than the eye of the prayerless can see. The familiar expression that "one lone man and God constitute a majority" finds its point just here.

One thing more: the servant "saw" because another person, already fitted with the lenses of faith, had helped him to see. As Christians we may pray with such a sense of the actual presence of the unseen God that others may "see" through us. It should be remembered that it was the experience of watching Jesus in prayer that led the disciples to ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

A PRAYER OF ISAIAH

Prayers, as such, do not appear frequently in the writings of the literary prophets. The reason is not that these giants of insight and faith did not pray: rather, it is because their works are made up largely of sermons and oracles which they delivered to the people. A minister's "sermon barrel" would contain few prayers even though much prayer had gone into the writing of the sermons. A notable exception to the fact that few recorded prayers appear in the writings of these men is found in the work of Jeremiah. Diary and sermonic

utterances co-mingle in his prophecies. Later in this chapter we shall have occasion to look at some of his prayers.

One of the prayers which we find in Isaiah is in the form of an expression of praise.[24] Most of the prayers we have considered thus far have been petitions. An interesting fact regarding Isaiah's praise-prayer is that he offers it *before* the deliverance he is celebrating has actually occurred. It is easy to be eloquent in praise following a great blessing, but to thank God in glowing terms for his gracious benefits before they have been received is more commendable. Such prayers are expressions of faith which prune the heart for the bearing of much fruit and also for receiving the answer to one's petition. Here is Isaiah's prayer:

> O Jehovah, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things, even counsels of old, in faithfulness and truth. For thou hast made of a city a heap, of a fortified city a ruin, a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built. Therefore shall a strong people glorify thee; a city of terrible nations shall fear thee. For thou hast been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall. As the heat in a dry place wilt thou bring down the noise of strangers; as the heat by the shade of a cloud, the song of the terrible ones shall be brought low.[25]

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[24] Other prayers in the Book of Isaiah include Isaiah's offer to serve (6:8) and a prayer out of exile for present mercy and help (63:15—64:12).

[25] Isa. 25:1-5.

Isaiah is looking toward the redeemed Hebrew community and the overthrow of an enemy which had been oppressing the city. Outstanding in the prayer is the recognition of Jehovah's care for the needy and the poor. It is difficult for us who look upon all nations as the people of Jehovah to appreciate how strongly these Hebrews felt that the integrity of God and the fate of their own nation were bound together. This prayer, celebrating a victory over enemies, was inspired by such an outlook. It is our responsibility to enlarge the prayer to include all nations and peoples and to see here an intimation of the victory of the Kingdom of God over all opposing forces.

As an illustration of the enlarging of traditional views, it is interesting to note what the British have done with the second stanza of "God Save the King."

The old version read:

O Lord our God, arise,
Scatter his enemies
And make them fall.
Confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks,
On thee our hopes we fix,
God save us all.

By order of King George VI, the new version reads:

Nor on this land alone
But be God's mercies known
From shore to shore.
Lord, make the nations see
That men should brothers be,
And form one family
The wide world o'er.

The new version was sung at a United Nations service in St. Paul's Cathedral, October 20, 1946. The king himself was present.

THE PRAYERS OF JEREMIAH

From time to time in this chapter we have made mention, in prospect, of the prayers of Jeremiah. Of all the prophets he is the most self-revealing. Charles E. Jefferson once stated that he was better acquainted with the Apostle Paul than with any man of his own generation. The reason lay in the fact that Paul's personality permeated everything Paul wrote with a directness and frankness few people allow themselves. The same is true of Jeremiah. Like Paul, he, too, bared his heart to public gaze.

The tragedy of Jeremiah's life was one with the tragedy of his age. It fell to him to announce the doom of his nation and to urge a policy of submission to the Babylonians, who were threatening its independence. This seemed treasonable to the king and people alike. In David's prayer, we saw how the existence of the Hebrew nation and the integrity of Jehovah were thought to go together. Little wonder, then, that Jeremiah, who saw the will of Jehovah in the overthrow of the nation, was regarded as a traitor. The people could call him this if they chose, but he knew that in defeat and humility rather than in pride and arrogance the true Israel would be preserved.

Jeremiah's view of the temple and its system also made him unpopular. He believed that the temple was

unnecessary for worship; in fact, the superstitious attitude of the people toward it at this time made its services undesirable. The prophet suffered public insult, even imprisonment, following the announcement of such views. It was out of the open wounds of his soul, which this humiliation brought, that prayer poured forth, prayers of protest and prayers of pain.

How poignant and touching is Jeremiah's prayer regarding his personal plight!

> Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy words were unto me a joy and the rejoicing of my heart: . . . . I sat not in the assembly of them that make merry, nor rejoiced: I sat alone because of thy hand; . . . . Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed?[26]

On another occasion he moves beyond questioning to rebellion. He is all but ready to resign from the ministry:

> O Jehovah, thou hast persuaded me, and I was persuaded: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am become a laughing-stock all the day, every one mocketh me.[27]

Protest he can and does, but to resign, however, is not in him. When he attempts it, a fire seems to burn in his bones and he "connot contain."

There are times when Jeremiah prays for God's vengeance upon those who persecute him:

> O Jehovah of hosts, that triest the righteous, that seest the heart and the mind, let me see thy vengeance on them: for unto thee have I revealed my cause.[28]

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[26] Jer. 15:16-18.
[27] Jer. 20:7.
[28] Jer. 20:12.

Again he cries:

> Jehovah, thou knowest all their counsel against me to slay me; forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from thy sight; but let them be overthrown before thee; deal thou with them in the time of thine anger.[29]

Such prayers, taken by themselves, shock the Christian conscience. They are so unlike the prayers of Jesus, who prayed for his enemies. Jeremiah felt his words deeply and meant them sincerely at the time of their utterance. The fact remains, however, that he did not carry them out into deeds but stood by the people to the very end. He "bore their pains and carried their griefs," choosing, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, to remain with the ruins, rather than to journey to Babylon, where he was regarded incorrectly as somewhat of a collaborationist and was promised a comfortable life.

Not all Jeremiah's prayers were centered in his own suffering and his desire to see vengeance wrought upon the people. This same man once cried:

> Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people![30]

In a similar vein he turns to Jehovah in prayer, taking his stand on the side of the people:

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[29] Jer. 18:23.
[30] Jer. 9:1.

> Though our iniquities testify against us, work thou for thy name's sake, O Jehovah: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee. O thou hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in the time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a sojourner in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?[a1]

We can see from these prayers that Jeremiah found in prayer the battleground of his soul. Here the deepest currents in his life—love, fear, rebellion, faith—were joined to make a mighty stream. Had they not found such an outlet, the personality of this tense man would have broken down. As it was, prayer kept him alive, for it was the very breath of his life.

[a1] Jer. 14:7, 8.

Helps for Study

1. Notice the number of prayers in this chapter which are directed toward the enrichment of the life of the nation. If people pray for the betterment of their nation, what else are they likely to do toward that end?

2. How many of the prayers for national uplift in this chapter could be applied to the United States of America today?

3. Was the prayer of Elijah on Mt. Carmel offered in the interest of proving the prophet right, or was it particularly related to the religious needs of the nation? What place does sound religion have in the building of a strong nation?

4. Which of the prayers of the kings which we have studied would be especially helpful for world statesmen during meetings of the United Nations groups when these bodies are confronted with far-reaching decisions?

5. What do you think would happen if we should pray the prayer of Elisha for eyes to see the surrounding Presence, applying this prayer to the Christian Church—indeed, to each of our local churches? How would a vision of God's inexhaustible supplies encourage us in our world-wide evangelistic task? How would it help a missionary having an uphill job in some isolated field?

6. In what way does the prayer life of Jeremiah prepare us to expect hardship and difficulties, as we seek to lift the world at its trouble-centers?

Chapter Three

THE PRAYERS OF THE PSALMISTS

THE Book of Psalms may be compared to an old-fashioned bouquet of garden flowers. In it is to be found a variety of floral patterns with brilliant hues splashed here and there upon the petals. The coloring and perfume of these "flowers" of the human spirit are real, not synthetic. Courage, confidence, fear, and doubt stand side by side. Suffering and deliverance, joy and gratitude are found also in these poems of the Hebrew people.

Our practice of breaking up a psalm into sections for use as a responsive reading in church may make for beautiful liturgy, but more often it turns a living plant into artificial greenery. If we were familiar with the psalm in its entirety before we read it in broken sections, the loss would not be as great, but since this is the only occasion when most of us read the psalm, we practically never have an opportunity to realize its

message *as a whole*. Many of the psalms are an expression in poetry of a man's religious experience. They are similar to a testimony in an early Methodist meetinghouse. One finds them, for the most part, however, singularly free from the exhibitionism of certain types of uncontrolled witness-bearing.[1] Depth of feeling and beauty of expression co-mingle in these outpourings of the soul to a degree never surpassed in the literature of the world.

It would take us too far afield if we were to look into the background of the Hebrew Psalter, how it came to be what it is, and the variety of its content both as to the dates of the material and its several poetic forms.[2] There can be little doubt that the psalms were used in the religious services of the second temple (B.C. 440 ff.), following the Exile. Some of them were written long before this, however, and others were composed at this time and later. That a number of the psalms were prepared expressly for use in the temple is clear. Others appear to be the private writings of individuals that were so true to the experiences of their fellows that they were taken up into the worship services of the temple. Most of the great hymns of our

[1]Some of the so-called imprecatory psalms (cf. Pss. 69 and 109) on the surface seem to be unreasonable cries for vengeance. They must be read, however, in the light of the times in which they were written.

[2]For an excellent summary of these matters the reader is directed to *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, p. 509 ff.

church came into use and into the hymnal because of this latter reason.[3]

In the spontaneous expressions of religious experience which are found in the psalms, it would be natural to assume that prayer played a part. When we turn to them, we find that this is true. The psalmists tell us frequently that they looked to Jehovah in prayer. More than this, in the midst of their psalms they sometimes break forth into prayer. A sense of God's presence so overwhelms them as they write, that they turn to him directly in praise or petition.

In the popular mind David is regarded as the author of all the psalms. A close reading of them will show that many are attributed to others beside the great king.[4] The fact is that the ascriptions of authorship at the beginning of each psalm are not a part of the psalm itself, and often represent a later opinion within the Hebrew community. Undoubtedly, most of them were written by unknown authors, men of great spiritual sensitiveness who recorded their "walk with God" and made the ages their debtor. It is better this way. The identity of the individual author does not prejudice the message of the psalm, and we are free to hear God speak within the written word.

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[3] Cf. Charles C. Washburn, *Hymn Interpretations*, (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1938), p. 5.

[4] Twelve are attributed to Asaph, nine to the Sons of Korah, two to Solomon, one to Ethan, and one to Moses.

GREAT PRAYERS OF THE BIBLE

I

WHEN GOD STIRS THE HEART

The inspiration of the psalms lies in the fact that they were written by men whose hearts God had stirred. Sometimes it was through nature that the awakening had come. These Wordsworths and Bryants of Israel have recorded their lofty visions inspired by nature, which was to them a divine teacher.

Take, if you will, Psalm 8:

O Jehovah, our Lord,
How excellent is thy name in all the earth,
Who hast set thy glory upon the heavens!
Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou established strength,
Because of thine adversaries,
That thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.
When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
The moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
And the son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him but little lower than God,
And crownest him with glory and honor.
Thou makest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands;
Thou hast put all things under his feet:
All sheep and oxen,
Yea, and the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
Whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.
O Jehovah, our Lord,
How excellent is thy name in all the earth!

As you read this psalm you will notice, first of all, that it is in the form of a prayer. The opening and closing stanzas contain the address to God:

O Jehovah, our Lord,
How excellent is thy name in all the earth!

Where has this author learned of the excellence of God? He gives us the answer to our question and gives it directly. The heavens, the moon, and the stars to him are the works of God's fingers; they are God's embroidery on the canopy of heaven. Yes, nature's panorama in the skies has moved the psalmist's heart and taught him the glory of God.

Our author has also found God in *human* nature. He is not discouraged with the possibilities of man. The reason is that men are made "but little lower than God." He rejoices in man's dominion over the earth. His control is noble, and God is ennobled through it. In these days when the harnessing of atomic energy has increased man's mastery over nature, more than ever deep trust in the human heart is required. It was because of man's kinship to God that the psalmist could rejoice at his dominion over the earth. We are still made but a "*little* lower than God" (italics mine), and prayer will help us to realize this truth, for when a man stands before God as directly as prayer requires, he will see himself as he is and be challenged to act accordingly.

SCRIPTURE STIRS THE HEART

Nature, however, was not the only source of man's inspiration. The pious Hebrew found also that Jehovah stirred his heart through the commandments of the Law and made this realization a concern for prayer. Listen to him as he prays:

Oh that my ways were established
To observe thy statutes![5]

Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold
Wondrous things out of thy law.[6]

Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law;
Yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.[7]

Before I was afflicted I went astray;
But now I observe thy word.[8]

The wicked have waited for me, to destroy me;
But I will consider thy testimonies.[9]

Oh how love I thy law!
It is my meditation all the day.[10]

All the above statements are taken from Psalm 119. It is an amazing poem of 176 stanzas celebrating the Law of Jehovah, amazing because throughout it is a prayer-meditation with but a single theme, the commandments of God. The law, to this devout man, was essentially his Scripture, and he is praying because God had touched his life through his "Bible." He prays for understanding and inspiration. He tells Jehovah that life is no longer a vain wandering, because it is now guided by the divine statutes, and although he is threatened by danger, he will not lose heart but will consult the Scriptures. At times his enthusiasm mounts high and he cries, "Oh how love I thy law!"

If this ancient Hebrew could find such strength in

[5] Ps. 119:5.
[6] Ps. 119:18.
[7] Ps. 119:34.
[8] Ps. 119:67.
[9] Ps. 119:95.
[10] Ps. 119:97.

the Old Testament Law, how much more should we, who have Jesus and the New Testament, find our inspiration in the Christian Scripture. And, like the psalmist, we should bring prayer into our Bible study, not as a substitute for a knowledge of the facts, but as a source of spiritual insight and understanding.

It is in line with the great insights of the writer of this prayer-psalm that the women of our church fellowship have made Bible study an essential part of their program. They know that the Word of God within the Scripture is necessary if they are to keep the missionary motive pure and glowing.

WORSHIP STIRS THE HEART

It was to be expected that men who found God in nature and Scripture should find him likewise in worship at the temple, and that they should pray to God about it. This they did, and in such psalms as Psalm 84 we find this outpouring in a prayer of petition and adoration:

> How amiable are thy tabernacles,
> O Jehovah of hosts!
> My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts
> of Jehovah;
> My heart and my flesh cry out unto the living God.
> Yea, the sparrow hath found her a house,
> And the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay
> her young,
> Even thine altars, O Jehovah of hosts,
> My King, and my God.
> Blessed are they that dwell in thy house:
> They will be still praising thee.[11]

[11] Ps. 84:1-4.

Body and soul, this man anticipates his visit to the temple. He seems even to be jealous of the birds who nest there continually, while he must make special journeys to this sacred shrine. Jehovah is his king and his God.

When the psalmist arrived at the temple his petition for a blessing mounted high:

> O Jehovah God of hosts, hear my prayer;
> Give ear, O God of Jacob.
> Behold, O God our shield,
> And look upon the face of thine anointed.
> For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand.
> I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God,
> Than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.
> For Jehovah God is a sun and a shield:
> Jehovah will give grace and glory:
> No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.
> O Jehovah of hosts,
> Blessed is the man that trusteth in thee.[12]

Little wonder that this pilgrim-worshipper was able to close the psalm with a beatitude! He had prayed earnestly for a vision of God, and God had "looked upon the face of his anointed." His conviction that no good thing would be withheld from the upright was based upon his own experience of answered prayer.

The anticipation and earnestness of this psalmist both inspires and judges lukewarm Sunday-morning congregations. Any teacher knows that eager students draw from him greater resources than he is conscious of possessing. Expectations and spiritual longing touch God deeply, likewise. To bless half-hearted

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[12] Ps. 84:8-12.

worshippers must be perfunctory and boresome, even for him.[13] But to respond to those who pray as this psalmist prayed, in the words of Frank Laubach, "brings a smile on the face of God."

II

WHEN SUFFERING CLOUDS THE VISION

The Bible is the frankest of books; it does not represent life as a series of cloudless days. Its heroes fail and its saints suffer. Nations and individuals alike are shown within its pages to be "standing in the need of prayer." The Scriptures do not stop here, however, but move on to give us picture after picture of suffering men actually at prayer.

The Book of Psalms is filled with these portraits of broken spirits who rise to take up life again, because they have prayed to Jehovah. In their prayers they do not hesitate to state what it is that troubles them. This does not mean that they are playing "cry-baby." They are saved from self-pity, first of all because their plight is desperate, and secondly, because they are trying to do something about it. If they believe that sin has caused the difficulty, they confess their need for forgiveness:

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[13] Isaiah stated definitely that this was the way Jehovah felt: "Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them" (Isa. 1:14).

> For mine iniquities are gone over my head:
> As a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.[14]

When troubled by such problems as the unjust prosperity of the wicked, they try to find the answer at the temple:

> When I thought how I might know this,
> It was too painful for me;
> Until I went into the sanctuary of God,
> And considered their latter end.[15]

Likewise, when they are bowed down because of the oppression of the poor, they plead their cause before Jehovah:

> Arise, O Jehovah; O God, lift up thy hand:
> Forget not the poor.[16]

In all these cases prayer is not a self-centered meditation on the misery of those who pray, which, if it were, might leave them more troubled than before; rather, it is an active campaign for finding God's answer to their difficulty.

A WITNESS TO PAST DELIVERANCE FROM SUFFERING

In some of the psalms we can see that the writer has been delivered already from his suffering. This deliverance may have come before he wrote the psalm, and the author is bearing testimony to answered prayer. Psalm 40:1-11[17] is an eloquent example of this kind of witness. It begins:

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[14] Ps. 38:4.
[15] Ps. 73:16, 17.
[16] Ps. 10:12.
[17] See footnote on page 50.

I waited patiently for Jehovah;
And he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.
He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay;
And he set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.
And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God:
Many shall see it and fear,
And shall trust in Jehovah.[18]

These words are so graphic that we can visualize clearly the author's experience. There were days of waiting before God, during which time the man's "cry" went upward to heaven. He did not wait in rebellion or despair, in spite of the fact that his suffering was as though he were in a horrible pit, knee-deep in miry clay which threatened to suck him under momentarily. Instead, he waited—*patiently*, and patience under such circumstances is always an expression of faith. This man can say, "Blessed is the man that maketh Jehovah his trust,"[19] because he has found it to be true.

A remarkable fact about the author's experience as seen in this psalm is that he was not only delivered from his suffering but that he was also taught, through prayer, a new truth concerning God, namely, that Jehovah thought *personally* about him. Because of this, prayer could be personal and direct. There was no further need for the formalities of sacrifice and offerings. We shall let him use his own words:

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[17] Verses 12-17, in the judgment of this writer, begin a new poem, which originally was not a part of this first section.

[18] Ps. 40:1-3.

[19] Ps. 40:4.

Many, O Jehovah my God, are the wonderful works which
thou hast done,
And thy thoughts which are to us-ward:
They cannot be set in order unto thee;
If I would declare and speak of them,
They are more than can be numbered.
Sacrifice and offering thou hast no delight in;
Mine ears hast thou opened:
Burnt-offering and sin-offering hast thou not required.[20]

But this was not all! The discovery of this truth about God had opened his heart to the Divine Presence, and his religion was now a daily delight as he sought to spread the good tidings:

I delight to do thy will, O my God;
Yea, thy law is within my heart.
I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great
assembly;
Lo, I will not refrain my lips,
O Jehovah, thou knowest.
I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart;
I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation;
I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from
the great assembly.[21]

Before we take this psalmist's religious convictions as a matter of course, we should remember that he was a Hebrew, living when the temple system was in order, with its stress on the necessity of rites and ceremonies. Jesus had not yet come, nor had Paul been saved by faith. Yet the accents of Jesus are upon this psalmist's words concerning God's "thoughts which are to us-ward," and the law within his heart is surprisingly suggestive of the indwelling Spirit. This Old Testa-

[20] Ps. 40:5, 6.
[21] Ps. 40:8-10.

ment saint was "not far from the kingdom of God," and prayer had been his teacher.

A WITNESS TO PRESENT DELIVERANCE FROM SUFFERING

Psalm 40:1-11 celebrates a *past* deliverance from suffering; Psalm 22 suggests *present* deliverance. While the author is in the midst of writing his prayer-psalm, the help comes.

Like the bursting of a shell, the prayer opens with a desperate cry from the heart:

> My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
> Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning?
> O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou answerest not:
> And in the night season, and am not silent.[22]

Loneliness and desolation are the meat and drink of this man. Night and day he has been praying. Momentarily, however, he finds comfort as he remembers that God has blessed his forefathers (vss. 4, 5). Would not the God of the past be the God of the present as well? There is hope in this thought, but it does not last long, for he seems to be so much more miserable than they. He continues his prayer:

> But I am a worm, and no man;
> A reproach of men, and despised of the people.
> All they that see me laugh me to scorn:
> They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,
> Commit thyself to Jehovah; let him deliver him:
> Let him rescue him, seeing he delighteth in him.[23]

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[22] Ps. 22:1, 2.
[23] Ps. 22:6-8.

It is a sorry story that he tells his God. Yet, once again, hope fills his mind as he recalls the religious training he had received in his home. Evidently he had been born into a religious family; his mother especially seems to have been a spiritual woman. In words which every parent might ponder he says to God:

> But thou art he that took me out of the womb;
> Thou didst make me trust when I was upon my mother's breasts.
> I was cast upon thee from the womb;
> Thou art my God since my mother bare me.
> Be not far from me; for trouble is near;
> For there is none to help.[24]

The comfort he receives from remembering his home is suddenly snatched away, as a new picture of his persecutors presses into his thought. The dramatic character of his description of his plight bears witness to its intensity.

> I am poured out like water,
> And all my bones are out of joint:
> My heart is like wax;
> It is melted within me.
> My strength is dried up like a potsherd;
> And my tongue cleaveth to my jaws;
> And thou hast brought me into the dust of death.
> For dogs have compassed me:
> A company of evil-doers have inclosed me;
> They pierced my hands and my feet.
> I may count all my bones.
> They look and stare upon me;
> They part my garments among them,
> And upon my vesture do they cast lots.[25]

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[24] Ps. 22:9-11.
[25] Ps. 22:14-18.

Seldom in all literature has a man expressed his suffering so vividly. With one final plea he cries:

> But be not thou far off, O Jehovah:
> O thou my succor, haste thee to help me.
> Deliver my soul from the sword,
> My darling from the power of the dog.
> Save me from the lion's mouth.[26]

Suddenly, and without warning, the heavens of brass against which his spirit had been beating gave way. Deliverance came!

> Yea, from the horns of the wild-oxen thou hast answered me.[27]

In the very middle of a verse God had answered his prayer. As he put it in an unforgettable and symbolical picture, he was pulled to safety just as the wild oxen had all but pinned him to the ground with its horns. Exactly what happened is not clear. Probably it was not so much a changing of the external circumstances which plagued him, as it was the coming into his life of a vivid sense of God's presence. Now he could bear what before had been unbearable. It is altogether possible that with a change in the man's outlook, a corresponding change occurred in his surroundings. What we are concerned to point out in this study, however, is that prayer—passionate, direct, and thoughtful—had brought release from despair and the beginning of a new life.

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[26] Ps. 22:19-21*a*.
[27] Ps. 22:21*b*.

GREAT PRAYERS OF THE BIBLE

III

WHEN FAITH SUSTAINS THE SOUL

Some men pray only when they are disturbed about life or are in great need. Not so with the psalmists. They do not limit their praying to the dark hours. When in moods of courage and confidence, they lift their prayers of faith. Hear them pray:

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore will we not fear, though the earth do change,
And though the mountains be shaken into the heart of the seas;
Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains tremble with the swelling thereof.[28]

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou hast anointed my head with oil;
My cup runneth over.[29]

Jehovah is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
Jehovah is the strength of my life;
Of whom shall I be afraid?[30]

Although the statements quoted above from Psalm 46 and Psalm 27 are not in the form of petition, they are

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[28] Ps. 46:1-3.
[29] Ps. 23:4, 5.
[30] Ps. 27:1.

no less prayers than if they were thus addressed. What we have here is a prayer-meditation uttered in the presence of God. All thought and speech are prayer if a vivid sense of God is present. Most of the great prayers of our lives are not put into words, in any event. The longing of our hearts and the set of our wills as we think of God is prayer. This is what we have in these prayer-meditations.

One further fact should be noted about these prayers of faith and trust. The psalmists do not close their eyes to the dangers surrounding them and deny the possibilities of harm, as some of our present-day "new thought" cults suggest that we should do. The author of Psalm 23 fully expects that he will have to "walk through the valley of the shadow," but he is convinced that the Shepherd-Lord will be with him. The author of Psalm 46 does not assume that God will hold back the earthquakes. He knows, however, that God is "a very present help in trouble"; therefore, he will not fear *even though calamity comes.*[31]

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[31] Even Psalm 91 (vs. 7), which states:

A thousand shall fall at thy side,
And ten thousand at thy right hand:
But it shall not come nigh thee,

closes with these words (vs. 15):

He shall call upon me, and I will answer him:
I will be with him *in* trouble [italics mine].

IV

WHEN THE SPIRIT CRAVES FORGIVENESS

Of all the prayers of the psalmists none are more moving or helpful than the Penitential Psalms.[32] They are called by this name because they are the outpouring cries of penitent hearts. Sin was very real to these men. They did not regard it as a nervous disorder; rather, it was disobedience before God:

> Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
> And done that which is evil in thy sight.[33]

Feeling this way about it, they did not try to explain away their conscience, or resort to what a popular magazine on psychology suggested in a recent article titled, "Forgive Thyself."

The man who sought forgiveness in Psalm 51 was encouraged to pray because of his idea of God. Like another whom we have already come to know,[34] he knew that God was personal and therefore that forgiveness was a personal affair which did not require formal offerings:

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[32] The Penitential Psalms include Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

[33] Ps. 51:4 (lines 1 and 2 only).

[34] Ps. 40:6.

For thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it:
Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.[35]

When the loving heart of God meets the penitent heart of his child, fellowship is restored and forgiveness is experienced.

Not only is this psalmist's idea of God a moving one, his understanding of sin and its consequences is remarkable also. It is very much like Jesus,' who taught that sin begins in our thoughts and attitudes, and that sinners, like the prodigal, are away from home. This is made clear in his prayer:

Create in me a clean heart, O God;
And renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence;
And take not thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation;
And uphold me with a willing spirit.[36]

What he wants is to feel again that he belongs to God and to know the joy of reunion.

Another saint in Israel has recorded his experience of forgiveness with graphic detail in Psalm 32. He had tried to hide his guilt and to appear before men to be better than he was. But Jehovah like the "hound of heaven"[37] kept after him. With his troubled conscience

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[35] Ps. 51:16, 17.
[36] Ps. 51:10-12.
[37] Cf. Francis Thompson's poem with this title.

bottled up within[38] he became ill. High fever set in, and his sleeplessness resulted in a loss of weight. But let him tell his experience in his own words:

> When I kept silence, my bones wasted away
> Through my groaning all the day long.
> For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me:
> My moisture was changed as with the drought of summer.[39]

This was not the end of the matter. A decision to admit his guilt and to confess his sin, which he did (vs. 5), brought forgiveness and release. Joy filled his life, and he cried out:

> Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
> Whose sin is covered.
> Blessed is the man unto whom Jehovah imputeth not iniquity,
> And in whose spirit there is no guile.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Many sorrows shall be to the wicked;
> But he that trusteth in Jehovah, lovingkindness shall compass him about.
> Be glad in Jehovah, and rejoice, ye righteous;
> And shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.[40]

The experiences of these two psalmists who felt guilt, prayed for forgiveness, and found the joy of restored fellowship with God, are true to what we know today. It is our own story that they tell. Many a one now living could write his own name after these psalms, because he had walked the same path and known the same joy of forgiveness. In helping those who feel

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[38] The psychological term here would be a repressed guilt complex. Records of similar cases today abound in professional clinical files.

[39] Ps. 32:3, 4.

[40] Ps. 32:1, 2, 10, 11.

the burden of guilt, these psalms can be very useful, for the modern penitent can make the prayer of the ancient penitent his very own.

V

WHEN GRATITUDE AND PRAISE ABOUND

We have seen that the Hebrew psalmists prayed when their hearts were stirred, when suffering was upon them, when faith had given them courage, and when their souls craved forgiveness. As rich and varied in type and character as all these prayers are, the list would be incomplete if we did not include their prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving. Here is the place where praise mounts high.

A distinguished benefactor whose purse strings were at the command of hundreds of needy people, has said that gratitude was a rare virtue among those whom he had helped. He was not complaining for, like Jesus, he had learned to lend "never despairing." The fact is that genuine gratitude is costly. It requires humility to be on the receiving end of life, and a true expression of thankfulness calls for an outgoing of self toward another.

The psalmists were prodigal in their expressions of praise, and praise is gratitude in motion. Such spontaneous outbursts as:

It is a good thing to give thanks unto Jehovah,
And to sing praises unto thy name, O Most High;
To show forth thy lovingkindness in the morning,
And thy faithfulness every night,
With an instrument of ten strings, and with the psaltery;
With a solemn sound upon the harp.
For thou, Jehovah, hast made me glad through thy work:
I will triumph in the works of thy hands.
How great are thy works, O Jehovah!
Thy thoughts are very deep,[41]

made glad the heart of God, and opened the life of the one offering the prayer to receive a blessing.

Frequently the praise was lifted to God for some gracious deed from the Divine hand. Thus Psalm 104:1-5 extols Jehovah for creating the earth and its stellar wonders:

Bless Jehovah, O my soul.
O Jehovah my God, thou art very great;
Thou art clothed with honor and majesty:
Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment:
Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain;
Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters;
Who maketh the clouds his chariot;
Who walketh upon the wings of the wind;
Who maketh winds his messengers;
Flames of fire his ministers;
Who laid the foundations of the earth,
That it should not be moved for ever.

Again, it is the kindness of God in his dealings with men which draws praise from the writer:

Bless Jehovah, O my soul;
And all that is within me, bless his holy name.
Bless Jehovah, O my soul,
And forget not all his benefits:
Who forgiveth all thine iniquities;

[41] Ps. 92:1-5.

Who healeth all thy diseases;
Who redeemeth thy life from destruction;
Who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;
Who satisfieth thy desire with good things,
So that thy youth is renewed like the eagle.[42]

An exceedingly interesting invitation to offer prayers of praise is found in Psalm 136. It is unusual in that the first line of each stanza lists a reason for praise, and the second line is a refrain which is repeated in each stanza throughout the psalm. After expressing gratitude for creation, the writer turns to celebrate Jehovah's saving hand in the history of Israel:

To him that smote Egypt in their first-born;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
And brought out Israel from among them;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
With a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
To him that divided the Red Sea in sunder;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
And made Israel to pass through the midst of it;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
To him that led his people through the wilderness;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever;
. . . . . .
Oh give thanks unto the God of heaven;
For his lovingkindness endureth for ever.[43]

This psalm is a formal one, written, no doubt, for the liturgy of the temple. The first part of each stanza was sung by a leader, with the choir responding in the second part. Again, it may have been spoken by

[42] Ps. 103:1-5.
[43] Ps. 136:10-16,26.

leader and people responsively, as we employ the psalms in our services of worship today.[44]

We should make greater use of these prayers of praise than we do. They may become vehicles for opening our own hearts to God, for the psalmists say what we feel, far more directly and beautifully than most of us can. Or we may turn to them for expressions of group gratitude in our churches. If we shall do this heartily, our services will be truly hours of worship, not just meetings of the minister and his congregation.

[44] For a fine and sensitive treatment of the psalms, the reader is invited to turn to *The Modern Message of the Psalms*, by Rollin H. Walker (Chicago: Abingdon Press, 1938).

Helps for Study

1. The psalmists' hearts were stirred by nature, Scripture, and worship in the temple. To what extent do these means quicken our hearts and minds today? Why is it that for some, no one of these proves to be an effective channel of inspiration?

2. In spite of the incentives to prayer which the psalmist found in temple worship, Jesus referred later to the holy place as a den of thieves and not a house of prayer. What does a church have to do in order to be sure that it will remain a house of prayer?

3. It would be helpful to turn to the church hymnal for a selection of prayer-hymns that would parallel the outlook of the psalms studied in this chapter.

4. How do Psalms 22 and 40:1-11 bear out the statement that prayer is a teacher of the soul?

5. Do you believe that such expressions of confident trust as are found in Psalms 23, 46, and 27 increase one's capacity to trust? Why?

6. Defend the statement that Psalms 51 and 32 are essentially Christian in viewpoint, although composed several hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

7. What would the psalmists say to a man who asserts that it is unnecessary to thank God, because God enjoys doing gracious things for his people?

Chapter Four

THE PRAYERS OF JESUS

IF a man were to pray as Jesus prayed, how would he pray? This is the heart of our concern as we turn to the prayers of Jesus. He has shown himself to be the true Master in meeting the best and the worst that life can bring, so much so, that we feel intuitively, that if we are praying as he prayed, we are praying in the right manner.

We have seen from the experiences of Old Testament saints that the prayers and the life of a person are inseparably woven together; that one's prayer life is the key to his spiritual power. This was very real to Jesus. When the disciples had tried to cure the epileptic boy and had failed, they asked Jesus why they had not succeeded. He replied: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."[1] Prayer made the difference between success and failure.

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[1] Mark 9:29.

GREAT PRAYERS OF THE BIBLE

I

JESUS PRAYED CONSTANTLY

As we read the Gospels we find frequent references to Jesus' own practice of prayer. Luke, in particular, emphasizes these prayer retreats. He prayed at his baptism,[2] following the day's ministry at Capernaum,[3] after cleansing the leper,[4] before choosing the Twelve,[5] at the feeding of the five thousand,[6] at Caesarea Philippi, when he asked the disciples who they thought him to be,[7] at the Transfiguration,[8] at the giving of the Lord's Prayer,[9] in Gethsemane,[10] and on the cross.[11] These prayer occasions are scattered throughout his ministry, and, for the most part, represent hours of great decision. That there were many other times besides these mentioned when Jesus prayed is certain, both from the fact that prayer assumes such an important place in his teaching and from the fact that anyone who prayed at the crisis points of his life with such mastery and boldness as did he must have been praying all along the way.

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[2]Luke 3:21, 22.
[3]Mark 1:35-38.
[4]Luke 5:16.
[5]Luke 6:12, 13*a*.
[6]Mark 6:45, 46.
[7]Luke 9:18*a*.
[8]Luke 9:28, 29.
[9]Luke 11:1.
[10]Mark 14:32-36.
[11]Luke 23:34, 46; Mark 15:34.

II

THE REASON JESUS PRAYED

To ask why Jesus prayed is like inquiring why the parlor fern sends its green tendrils hopefully toward the light. There is a natural attraction here. The fern, being what it is and light being what it is, the one must of necessity seek out the other. Just so, it was inevitable that Jesus should turn to his Father in prayer.

Let us put it more specifically. Jesus prayed to God because he knew, at the very center of his being, that God was a loving Father and that he was his child. Therefore, it was only natural to expect that he should have communion with his Father. Prayer provided that fellowship. All about him, Jesus saw human parents responding to the petitions of their children. Would not the Heavenly Father do the same, and more besides? This is a simple, but, nevertheless, a very direct logic. In his most colorful language Jesus put it this way:

> ". . . . Or what man of you, if his son asks him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? . . . ."[12]

At least God can be counted upon to do as much as any human father, at his best, would do; in fact, he can be depended upon to do more.

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[12] Matt. 7:9-11.

When Jesus said that God would act like a Father, he was thinking of the best qualities of human parentage raised to their sublimest degree. To point out that some fathers are anything but loving, is not to discredit Jesus' conviction in the least. It is but to quibble in the presence of what is obvious and unmistakable. Any man or woman among us who has known what it means to have a noble and loving father here on earth should have no difficulty in believing that the Divine Father would answer prayer, and, as Jesus puts it, "give good things to those who ask him." Yes, he will respond and that without lengthy and affected petitions on our part. "Vain repetitions" are unnecessary because the Father is acquainted with our needs even before we ask him.[13]

TWO PRAYER PARABLES

In order to bring home further to the human heart the obviousness of the truth that God answers prayer, Jesus told the twin[14] parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge.

The Friend at Midnight

> And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer

[13] Matt. 6:7, 8.

[14] We refer to these as twin parables because they each teach the same truth and employ the same method—that of contrast rather than comparison.

from within, 'do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'?"[15]

The Unjust Judge

He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"[16]

The point in both of these parables is made, not by comparing God with the begrudging givers, but by *contrasting* him with them, both as to the motive which prompts his generosity and the speed with which he responds. If two such unloving characters will, for such ungenerous reasons, respond finally to the persistent demands of the midnight caller and the unfortunate widow, *how much more* will the God of grace and mercy give ready and abundant response to the children whom he loves!

One could wish that it were possible to dwell at length on the superb dramatic quality of these parables. Take, if you will, the situation in this oriental home, where all had "crawled" into the same bed and the baby had finally fallen asleep. The father did not

[15]Luke 11:5-8.
[16]Luke 18:2-8.

want to get up; he did so only to get rid of the visitor. To make his way across the bodies of his family without waking them, as he got out of bed, was precarious enough, but to find a path to the door in a room where the chickens and other livestock were sleeping, without pushing the setting hen from her nest or getting a bawl out of the calf, was too much to hope for. Remember, there were no electric light buttons to push or flashlights to illuminate the path.

If this is not drama enough, what of the contrast in the characters Jesus places side by side in the story of the Widow and the Judge? An oriental widow was without opportunity to earn a living or take an active part in civic life. She was practically helpless. Not so with the judge. He was completely self-sufficient. In the words of Jesus he "neither feared God nor regarded man." What more unlikely prospect than to expect this kind of man to give in to this sort of woman—but he did. To be sure, he paid attention lest she wear him out, *but he did pay attention.* How much more would God hear the cries of his beloved!

Jesus saw the inevitability of God's response to our prayers as though it were an axiom in science or a theorem in geometry. Here was a truth which gave new meaning to all other truths. He was grieved because it was not crystal clear to everyone. This is the reason he said: "Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"[17]

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[17] Luke 18:8.

III

WHEN JESUS PRAYED

If we will look, once again, at the list of occasions when Jesus prayed, already given in this chapter, we shall notice that it was in the crisis hours, at the times of difficult decisions, that he turned to the Father. These were the moments when the issue of his life and the purpose of his ministry seemed to hang in the balance. Prayer brought him perspective, poise, and peace. In these moments the clamor of public opinion gave way to the calm of the will of God. Jesus' retreats for prayer were "real" in his life; they actually made a difference to him. "In hours of direst distress he takes his flight to solitude and there seeks a refuge in prayer. All that passed through the soul of Jesus on these occasions, we shall never know. But that he did pray and continue to pray, that he died in prayer, is all that we are in need of knowing."[18]

AT THE BAPTISM

It is helpful, as we seek to understand what prayer meant to Jesus, to consider what was involved in these crises when Jesus sought guidance and strength through prayer. Take, for instance, his baptism. Luke tells us that he prayed in this significant hour:

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[18] *The Religion of Jesus*, by Walter E. Bundy. Copyright 1928. Used by special permission of the publishers, The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized *and was praying* [italics mine], the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."[19]

This was the experience which launched Jesus into his public ministry. It was a time when God announced to him that he was the Messiah and when he was empowered by the Spirit to fulfil his high calling. Small wonder, then, that prayer lay at the heart of this realization and empowerment. We are not told for what he prayed, but there can be little doubt but that it was a prayer of surrender to the Father and commitment to the Kingdom he was to proclaim. As William J. Lowstuter of Boston so forcefully emphasized, the baptism of Jesus and the commission to announce the Kingdom of God belong together.

OUTSIDE CAPERNAUM

Following the first day's ministry in Capernaum, when many had sought him for healing and the promise of an extended and successful ministry was evident, Jesus arose early in the morning, "a great while before day, . . . and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed."[20] We can only surmise what it was that concerned him. Was it the question of the healing miracles, to what extent he should continue this work lest it interfere with his preaching of the Kingdom and lead men to seek bodily health only? Or

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[19] Luke 3:21, 22.
[20] Mark 1:35.

was he praying to learn whether he should settle down in Capernaum for a lengthy ministry in this important city or whether to take to the open roads where he must live as one who had "no place to lay his head"? Whichever it was, prayer led him to say, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out."[21] He cast his lot with all itinerate preachers, those who preceded him and those who, since his time, have gone to the ends of the earth in his name.

CHOOSING THE DISCIPLES

Another important decision which Jesus faced was the choosing of the Twelve to be with him. They were to be the officers' corps in the new campaign. Out into the seclusion of the hills he went, and "all night he continued in prayer to God." Mission boards have personnel committees. Their task of approving the candidates for missionary service is one of the most sacred and responsible assignments which any group in the church is called upon to carry out. The writer has talked with young people who were aglow with joy because the committee had accepted them for service. He has also looked into the tear-stained faces of those who have been turned down, not because of their lack of consecration, but because of the need for other qualifications which the rigor of missionary work demands. It is difficult, frequently, for them to under-

[21] Mark 1:38.

stand why they are refused, and only one who has prayed, as Jesus prayed before choosing his disciples, is prepared to make the decision which affects the destiny of the Kingdom as well as the future of those who apply to serve. The importance of prayer in Jesus' life at this significant moment, when he was engaged in choosing the Twelve, must be equally clear. In contrast to the case with which Jesus chose his followers, is the hurried and thoughtless manner in which church organizations sometimes select their officers. His prayerful concern condemns our carelessness.

AFTER FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND

The feeding of the five thousand seemed to be a turning point in the ministry of Jesus, as far as his public following was concerned. Mark tells us that immediately after he had dismissed the crowd "he went into the hills to pray."[22] It is from the Fourth Gospel that we find a hint as to the subject of this prayer. John says:

> Perceiving then that they [the people] were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself.[23]

The temptation to become an earthly ruler according to the traditional hopes of the Hebrew people was driving Jesus to prayer. He had decided against this kind of messiahship during the forty days of tempta-

[22] Mark 6:46.
[23] John 6:15.

tion in the wilderness. There he saw it as a possibility; here it was being pushed upon him by the people as an actuality. It is the opinion of this writer that Jesus' refusal to allow the people to press him into an earthly rule marked the beginning of his loss of the people's following. He firmly refused to be led by the popular mind and knew what this disappointing of the people would mean to his ministry. This is the reason it was a temptation to give in to them—but he did not! Prayer gave him the insight and the strength to meet temptation.

AT CAESAREA PHILIPPI

It was at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" and then moved on to inquire, "Who do you say that I am?" These were important questions to Jesus because they came at a time when he was faced with rejection at the hands of the religious leaders among the Jews, and by the general public as well. Because of this, thoughts of himself as a suffering and dying Messiah filled his mind. Luke tells us that it was out of solitary prayer that Jesus turned to the disciples with the above question.[24] He was praying as he faced the all-important decision of his ministry, namely, how he was to carry out the commission of messiahship.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Several days after the Caesarea Philippi experience Luke records that Jesus:

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[24] Luke 9:18.

> . . . . took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.[25]

Clearly, the same question was troubling him—the prospect of rejection, suffering, and death. It was not mainly a matter of physical pain; rather, it was the effect of the cross upon his ministry and mission that concerned Jesus most. What we want to see here, however, is that he turned to prayer for his decision.

We are discovering in this brief examination of the prayer situations in Jesus' life that *prayer to him was not something to be reached for as impulse directed, but rather, an experience in which great things were happening, and an occasion for searching thought and direct communion with God. Life-changing decisions were born in these praying hours.* His being was charged with the dynamic energies of God. Is not this the true explanation of his transfigured countenance? Great insights of two mighty men in Israel, Moses and Elijah, came home to Jesus as he prayed on the mountain. Both of them had known rejection at the hands of the people they had chosen to serve. Yet, both of them remained loyal to their call from God, and their ministry had lifted the nation.

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[25] Luke 9:28-31.

From this time on Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" to accept the cross which had raised its hideous head in the middle of the road he was travelling. He would embrace it as from the hand of God himself. Prayer had shown the way.

IV

THE PRAYERS OF JESUS

We are given much more than just the prayer situations in which we are told that Jesus prayed, in our search to discover his secret. The Gospel writers have preserved for us some of the actual prayers that he offered. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke* we have only seven, but they are so characteristic of Jesus, and so instructive for us, that, having them has made us rich indeed.

"I THANK THEE, FATHER...."

The first prayer which we shall consider grew out of a successful evangelistic tour in which seventy volunteer workers had visited towns and villages where Jesus was about to come.[26] They had been well received. They reported: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"[27] Jesus entered into their enthusiasm whole-heartedly and told them that while they were

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*The length of this study has limited our consideration of the prayers of Jesus to those found in the first three Gospels.

[26]Matthew gives it a somewhat general setting (Matt. 11:25, 26).

[27]Luke 10:17.

gone he had been thinking of their work, presumably in prayer, and that a vision of their success had burst upon him. He saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven, and it was to him a sign of the overthrow of evil in the world, through the preaching of the Kingdom. After sharing with them his personal religious experience, Luke notes that:

> In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will."[28]

Do not miss the sheer joy of the prayer. All heaven and earth were included in this exultant exclamation of thanksgiving and praise. It is not a studied or premeditated utterance, but instead, represents the spontaneous overflow of Jesus' gratitude that the gospel message could be understood by *everyone*, and especially by the poor and underprivileged who could not keep up with the sophisticated religion of the theological highbrows. As a revered teacher of the writer once pointed out, Jesus' joy is all the more remarkable when we realize that his cause for rejoicing was one of the reasons the religious leaders were zealous to be rid of him. They no longer had any reason to feel superior—now that the truth of God could be understood by everyone, not by the privileged few only—and they resented it. The points that concern us here, however, are that Jesus poured the supreme joy of this moment into a prayer and that it was preserved for all time.

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[28]Luke 10:21.

"I HAVE PRAYED FOR YOU"

It is not surprising that he who assured the world that God is interested in the smallest details of our lives, details as minute as the hairs of our heads,[29] should concern himself with the experiences of those about him. This fact is brought out in Jesus' prayer of intercession for Peter.[30] We do not have the exact words of the prayer, but Jesus tells Peter at the Last Supper that he has prayed for him, that he might remain faithful throughout the trying hours which lay ahead:

> "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."[31]

Jesus believed that his prayer would help Peter and that telling him about it would further strengthen him. Peter's staunch support of his Lord in Jerusalem, following the resurrection, and his sermon at Pentecost should be considered in the light of this prayer.

We do not understand fully how our prayers for others make a difference in their lives, or exactly why it is necessary to pray for them, when God already loves them more than we possibly can. *We do know, however, that Christian love prompts such prayers and that Jesus' example encourages us to pray for one another.*

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[29] Luke 12:6, 7.

[30] The reader may turn also to John 17 for a studied prayer of intercession, in which Jesus is represented as praying for himself, his disciples, and all who might be reached through them.

[31] Luke 22:31.

It may be that we shall discover, in the light of further knowledge, that the reason good will toward others reaches them through prayer to God, is that the universe is put together in a way that makes this possible. However this may be, the prayer experience of the centuries as far back as Abraham, who prayed for Lot, bears glowing witness to the power and effectiveness of intercessory prayer.

"ABBA, FATHER,....WHAT THOU WILT"

When Jesus accepted the cross at the Transfiguration, he did not develop a martyr-complex that sent him rushing to his death, as though he gloried in the suffering. Once more, just before the end, he faced the issue in the Garden of Gethsemane, and this time too, he faced it in prayer:[32]

> "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt."[33]

Without question, this is the best known of all Jesus' prayers, yet for many of us it is the most difficult kind of prayer to offer, as we are facing a dreaded situation from which there seems to be no turning. Weeks before, Jesus had taught the disciples in the Lord's prayer to say:

> "Thy will be done,
> On earth as it is in heaven."[34]

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[32] Luke pictures Jesus praying this prayer but once; Mark and Matthew tell us that it was repeated twice.

[33] Mark 14:36.

[34] Matt. 6:10.

Now, he is saying it himself. Under circumstances that shake his soul, he is expressing his own sincere desire to avoid the cross if it be possible.[35] By "possible," Jesus means *provided God's purposes can be accomplished in some other way.* If this cannot be, as, indeed, it could not, then God's will must be done, regardless: "Not what I will, but what thou wilt," Jesus prays. Terrible suffering was involved, but it was not to be meaningless, for from it God would bring a triumphant outcome. This kind of prayer is possible only for the person whose God inspires absolute trust, whose God is Jesus' kind of loving Heavenly Father. It is also possible only to the person who believes in a God of power. Half-gods will not do! We must be able to say with Jesus, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee," if we are to say also with him, "Not what I will, but what thou wilt."

PRAYERS FROM THE CROSS

When Whittier wrote:

> "The last low whispers of our dead
> Are burdened with His Name,"[36]

he was writing of those who die with Jesus' name on their lips in prayer. In this, they are like their Master who himself died, praying to his God.

Three prayers came from the cross; three prayers,

[35] Matthew's version reads: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt. 26:39).

[36] John G. Whittier: "We May Not Climb the Heavenly Steeps," *The Methodist Hymnal,* No. 120.

loving, sorrowful, bold, and triumphant. He prayed for those who were crucifying him:

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."[37]

How right he was! The soldiers were *blindly* carrying out a distasteful order. The people were *blindly* following their overbearing religious leaders. The Pharisees and Sadducees were *blindly* submitting to their own prejudices. And Jesus was praying that their blindness be forgiven, at a time when he was suffering at their hands. This is Christian prayer for one's enemies.

The second prayer from the cross is a cry of desolation:

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"[38]

In this moment Jesus was one with all those who, before his day and after, have felt that God has deserted them. You will recognize these words as coming from the twenty-second psalm, itself a prayer of a nameless soul who felt as Jesus was now feeling.[39] Only one who was familiar with the tragedy of the man who had written the psalm could use its words to bear his own pain to God. Jesus was not quoting Scripture in a mechanical fashion; he was praying in agony, and his "Bible" had given him words in which to phrase his prayer.

We should not miss the fact that Jesus turned to prayer as a means of expressing his questions and mis-

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[37] Luke 23:34.
[38] Matt. 27:46.
[39] Cf. Chapter III, p. 52, where we considered this prayer.

givings. He is not led to cry: "There is no God!" as many do when the tides of life are too great for them. The prayer-habits of the years stood by him, and he turned toward his Father, rather than away from him, in his darkest hour.

The final prayer which Jesus offered was a prayer of triumphant trust. Luke tells us that it was lifted heavenward "with a loud voice," as though he had summoned every ounce of his fast-ebbing strength to proclaim his faith in God:

> "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!"[40]

After this Jesus breathed his last. In committing his spirit to the Father, he was committing his life, his mission, his ministry, and his future to God. The resurrection was God's answer to this prayer of commitment.

V

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Whether we should regard the Lord's Prayer as a teaching of Jesus about prayer or as an actual prayer of Jesus is debatable. Certainly, Jesus could have prayed every phrase of the prayer, with the exception of the petition of forgiveness. One writer has said: ". . . . it sprang from the very depths of his religious experience. It is the richest single word of his that has come down to us. No other one passage gives us

[40] Luke 23:46.

so much of Jesus himself. Into no utterance did Jesus pour more of his life, thought, feeling and faith."[41] How then can we thoughtlessly repeat it as we *recite* its words in public worship?

Matthew included this prayer in the Sermon on the Mount.[42] Luke tells us that Jesus gave it to the disciples when, deeply moved by the sight of their Lord in prayer, they requested that he teach them to pray. There must have been something exceedingly impressive in the picture of the praying Jesus, a something that made the disciples long to pray as he prayed. To meet their request Jesus gave them this prayer[43]:

'Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.'[44]

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[41] *Our Recovery of Jesus*, by Walter E. Bundy. Copyright 1929. Used by special permission of the publishers, The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

[42] The Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew, chapters 5 to 7, is recognized as a collection of Jesus' teachings, gathered together for didactic purposes.

[43] A comparison with Luke 11:2-4 will show some differences in the form of the prayer. The phrase, "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory," was probably added to provide a liturgical ending, as it is not found in all of the manuscripts of Matthew. It is, however, in full accord with the spirit and meaning of the prayer.

[44] Matt. 6:9-13.

It is not clear as to whether Jesus intended for us to repeat the prayer word for word. Perhaps he was suggesting it primarily as an example of good praying. On the other hand, Jesus would not object to our using it as a ritualistic prayer, provided we understood its meaning and really meant it as a genuine expression of our heart's desire, without which we should not pray the prayer at all.

THE PRAYER PERFECT

The Lord's Prayer might well be called a perfect prayer. It begins as all prayers should, with a mighty sense of the greatness of God:

Our Father who art in heaven.

God is exalted above the earth, yet not removed from the earth. He is Father of all, and men are to pray with their brothers' needs in mind, as well as their own.

Hallowed be thy name.

Not only is God great above all others; he is also holy and righteous, and his children should revere his name, not in words alone but also in attitude and deed.

Thy kingdom come.

Life and history are not without purpose. God's Kingdom is in the making here on earth, a great and glorious society, a brotherhood of good will.

Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.

The Kingdom of God will be a perfect expression of the perfect will of God in every human relationship.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Material needs in the Kingdom are not beneath God's concern. Bread, books, hospitals, clothing, proper housing—all these, and more besides, are required if men are to fulfil their destiny.

> And forgive us our debts,
> As we also have forgiven our debtors.

Man is more than a body; he is also a living soul. His nature is moral and spiritual basically; therefore, he needs forgiveness and must himself be forgiving. Only thus can we have fellowship with a righteous God and also with his erring brother.

> And lead us not into temptation,
> But deliver us from evil.

The possibilities of evil are on every hand. Man's weakness and lack of foresight may find him unprepared to meet a sudden turn of events that tempt his soul. He needs God's help at this point.

> For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.

The Kingdom is God's, the power is God's, the glory is God's. Men, however, may share in them as children participate in their father's life. Here is our hope and assurance of final victory.

JESUS' RELIGION DEFINED

Jesus did not leave his followers a formal creed. Those creeds we use in our churches were written much later, and in order to define the faith. The Lord's Prayer, however, is not far from being a creed. It tells us that God is a righteous Father, that the Kingdom is the goal of history, and that men are brothers. It

asserts Jesus' belief in forgiveness and his conviction that our material life comes from the hand of God. Finally, it expresses the faith that, by the Father's help, evil can be overcome. All in all, the Lord's Prayer is a definition of the religion by which Jesus lived and died.

Most of you who read these pages are world-minded. Already the church has reached out across seas and continents to share its faith in Jesus and his Kingdom. The Lord's Prayer is especially pertinent to this undertaking. It cuts across all social and economic lines. It mounts all racial and nationalistic barriers. It unites all political and cultural cleavages. In it there is no East or West, no North or South to limit the outreach. It cannot be prayed with sincerity and shut out anyone anywhere. It is the ideal prayer for the missionary, at home or abroad. When used at home it keeps us from becoming complacent; when used abroad it helps other races to realize that we are their brothers.

In concluding this chapter on the prayers of Jesus, we are privileged to quote the wise and beautiful statement of George A. Buttrick: "Other men's words are like wire: the very same words on his [Jesus'] lips are like charged wire. Other men's days are like winter trees: his days with the same deeds are like a tree breaking in blossom or heavy with fruit. . . . his spirit was completely dedicated to God *in prayer* and *therefore* made vital. So attuned was he to God by secret communion that his words are as God's words. He did what other men had done—trudged the road, taught

his truth, healed the sick, and flinched not from martyrdom—but, oh, the difference! The disciples tracked down the secret to its hiding place—'Lord, teach us to pray . . . . . '"[45]

[45] George A. Buttrick, *Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942), p. 29.

Helps for Study

1. If you were to pray as Jesus prayed, how would you pray:

   a) Would you pray in public or private?
   b) Would you make long or short prayers?
   c) For what would you pray?
   d) Would you seek to change God's mind or adjust your desires to meet his will?
   e) Would you pray only when confronted with a problem?
   f) Would you pray for others?
   g) Would you confidently expect prayer to make a difference in your life?

2. If you were to teach another how to pray, how would you begin:

   a) With instructions concerning posture, place, procedures, etc?
   b) With a written prayer to be memorized?
   c) With descriptive words concerning the character of God?

3. Did Jesus always get what he wanted when he prayed? What about the removal of the cup? Did the Father always answer his prayer?

4. Compile a list of suggestions as to how we could make our use of the Lord's Prayer more effective.

Chapter Five

THE PRAYERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

THE crucifixion was a rude shock to the disciples of Jesus. In spite of intimations of the coming tragedy, they were unprepared for the cross. The popular prophecies did not predict it. Furthermore, that life could hold such suffering for one as loving and good as Jesus must have seemed unthinkable; therefore, when he spoke of his coming death, the disciples' minds were closed to it.

The resurrection, on the other hand, was a glorious shock to the disciples. Jesus was once again restored to their fellowship. Here, too, however, they were unprepared for what happened. The records indicate that the event took them by surprise. What it meant for their own personal futures, as well as for the future of the Kingdom, they could but dimly foresee.

GREAT PRAYERS OF THE BIBLE

I

IN AN UPPER ROOM

Among the words which the risen Lord spoke to the disciples was the charge to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father.[1]

These days of waiting were filled with both expectation and uncertainty. Those present were not sure for what they were tarrying, but they were confident the experience would be something tremendous. They met in an upper room, probably the very one where Jesus had eaten the Last Supper with the disciples. We are not to think that they folded their hands and sat in silence. Many words were spoken. A stenographic report of what was said would be interesting and informative beyond measure.

We can be sure that Jesus was the main topic of the conversation of these days. With excited and rapt expression, the brethren undoubtedly recalled the months they had spent with him during his ministry. In this company were the disciples and Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Others, who may have been a part of the band of five hundred who saw the risen Lord,[2] were probably present, likewise. As they looked back over their fellowship with Jesus, in the light of the resurrection, words which he had spoken were seen to have new meaning. It is the same with us. Do you not remember how on Christmas morning when all the

[1] Acts 1:4.
[2] II Cor. 15:6.

sealed packages are opened their sparkling contents clear up many words and acts which were confusing during the weeks when gift-buying was the order of the day? "Now I know why you didn't meet me that afternoon," we say. "So this is the reason you didn't want me to place my clothes in the back closet!" Thus it goes. In this same way the resurrection clarified many of the words of Jesus which they had been unable to understand, and, during this time of waiting, the brethren must have called them to mind.

"DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO PRAYER"

The Book of Acts, which carries the story of these early days, contains a line which interests us greatly. It states: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer."[3] We wish that we had a record of these prayers. Were they asking for courage to see this thing through, in view of the opposition to Jesus among the religious leaders? Were they seeking forgiveness for their failure to trust their Lord fully, when they had grown impatient with him as he plotted his course toward the cross? Were they expressing their exultant thanksgiving to God for raising his Son to be with them again? If we but ask ourselves for what we would have been praying under these circumstances, we shall not be far from the truth, for we are not unlike our early brothers in the faith.

We are given one of the prayers which the upper-

[3] Acts 1:14.

room company offered at this time. They were selecting a successor to Judas. Two candidates were put forward, men who had the proper qualifications, since both had been with Jesus from the baptism until the resurrection. In making the choice they fell back upon an ancient custom of Israel in such matters, namely, the casting of lots.[4] We may prefer that they had used another method, and it must be said that as far as we know this was the last time they resorted to this one. It should not be regarded as a precedent for the church to follow. Casting lots is not a religious procedure. It may serve well to decide which team will have the kick-off in a football game, but it is not suitable for making religious decisions. These men must have felt this way, and so coupled their decision with prayer:

> "Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place."[5]

The lot fell upon Matthias, who is not mentioned afterward in the account. By recording the prayer offered, Luke definitely shows that he considered this as of more importance than the lot.

Some present-day Christians join prayer and magical practices similar to lot-casting. After praying they open their Bible at random, blindly place a finger on a verse, and regard whatever instruction they "see" as an answer to prayer. This procedure is resorting to a practice which the New Testament Church long ago

[4] Casting lots is the biblical counterpart of "flipping a coin."
[5] Acts 1:24, 25.

discarded in favor of accepting the guidance of the Spirit in our lives, and it should be abandoned.

PENTECOST

Our study of the prayers of Jesus taught us that prayer was far more than an occasional word, hurriedly or frantically directed toward heaven. It is, instead, an experience of actual fellowship with God in which the soul grows just as a plant will grow when placed in the light. We are not surprised, then, that the prayers of these followers of Jesus during the days of waiting in the upper room resulted in Pentecost.

Prayer opened the minds and hearts of this company, thus making it possible for God to send the Spirit into their lives. God does not "force" his blessings upon us or his power into our personalities. We are not steam turbines to be mechanically moved into action but living souls to be inspired and led as we voluntarily seek his grace. This seeking of God's grace is what the devout company of disciples did as they prayed and tarried for the promise of Jesus to be fulfilled. In the words of one writer: "It was not belief in God that the disciples lacked. What they needed was for their faith to take fire, *their prayer to become realized fellowship* (italics mine), their aspiration to become matched by the power and impulse to act."[6]

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[6]Floyd V. Filson: *One Lord—One Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), p. 182.

The experience of Pentecost is related in a suggestive and dramatic way:

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.[7]

Many words have been written to describe actually what happened here. Some among us stress the tongues and the flame. The more discerning emphasize the power and the presence of the Spirit in the heart. Prayer can no more be left out in this accounting than oxygen can be omitted from an analysis of water. A new fellowship was born on that day, *a brotherhood of those who had prayed together and who had been blessed by God together.*[8] Such fellowship constitutes the true church, whether in the first century or the twentieth.

II

THE FIRST WITNESSES

The story of the first witnesses has about it the accent of youth. High daring and bold adventure color the pages of the Book of Acts. From the outset, these

[7] Acts 2:1-4.

[8] Cf. the recent book, *Together*, edited by Glenn Clark (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), in which a group of present-day Christian leaders write of Pentecost and prayer.

early Christians moved into action with steady purpose and dramatic decision.

Peter and John continued to frequent the temple, as indeed did all the members of the Christian brotherhood until opposition drove them away. They went at the hour of prayer.[9] Their prayer habits of the years continued to serve them well. On one of these visits the apostles encountered a lame man whom Peter felt moved to heal "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth," as he put it. In doing so, he believed that he was continuing the work of his Lord. The ministry of Jesus was being extended in the deeds of the church.

By healing the lame man, however, Peter was taking his life in his hands. Arrest quickly followed, and the shadow of persecution hung low over the brotherhood. All too fresh in their memories was the crucifixion of Jesus. This was their first test following Pentecost, as Acts presents the story. How would it turn out?

The Jewish court was more lenient with Peter and John than it had been with their Lord. After warning them against further speaking in the name of Jesus, it let them go. When the disciples rejoined their company, a spontaneous prayer rose from every lip. To the Sovereign Lord who had created the universe and who had purposed in the sending of Jesus to bless mankind, they offered their prayer of triumph. Instead of praying for deliverance from danger, they asked for boldness to bear it. Like Phillips Brooks, who sought

[9] Acts 3:1.

not the removal of his difficulties but increased strength to handle them, they prayed:

> " . . . . And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus."[10]

These men did not contemplate a program of retrenchment. It was no time for recalling workers from the field or for shortening the line of attack. They needed more power for facing dangerous opposition, to be sure, but prayer soon placed it into their hands:

> And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.[11]

It was a kind of Pentecost all over again. Yes, prayer and pentecostal power are closely associated in the New Testament—and so they are in every great spiritual awakening of history. When the story of our own century is told, whether or not we have prayed will be evident.

A MARTYR AND HIS PRAYER

When Jesus said, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple,"[12] he was being realistic. Not religious sentimentality but hard fact lay behind his statement. He was not interested in the enlistment of workers on easy-going terms.

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[10] Acts 4:29, 30.
[11] Acts 4:31.
[12] Luke 14:27.

In the beginning he told his followers of hardships that they would have to suffer, so that when difficulties would come, they would not feel that they had been misled and turn back. If this happened, the erstwhile disciple would be as salt that had lost its taste.[13] His seasoning power in society would be gone and he could no longer "whet the appetites" of men for the good life.

Stephen was the first Christian, as far as we know, to bear his cross to the death for Jesus. His name is listed among the seven deacons appointed to administer the welfare work of the church. Actually, however, he centered his activities in preaching to the Greek-speaking Jews, where he showed marked ability in public debate. When they could not answer his arguments, they determined to silence his tongue by death. This method of running away from the truth is the gangster method, whether used in the first century or the twentieth. It may be fatal for the person on whom the anger of another falls, but it is never final for the truth itself. Another prophet with a similar message is sure to rise, as when Herod beheaded John the Baptist. No sooner had he relaxed from his dastardly deed, than word came of the preaching of Jesus, causing Herod to say: "John I beheaded; but who is this . . . .?"[14] Truth cannot be killed by murdering the man who holds it.

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[13]Luke 14:34, 35.
[14]Luke 9:9.

As the stones were mercilessly falling upon him, Stephen prayed a prayer after the manner of his Lord on the cross:

> And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."[15]

There can be no doubt but that the example of Jesus strengthened Stephen in this hour of suffering, even as today children are emboldened to face life courageously when they recall the prayers of their parents in dark hours. Stephen's prayer was addressed to Jesus. The risen Christ was so alive in the consciousness of the early church, that prayer to him was natural.

This prayer may have been a turning point in the history of the world, because a young man stood by and heard it.[16] His name was Saul, and he became Paul the Missionary to the Gentile World. Who can measure the effect of this kind of prayer, uttered under these particular circumstances, upon a youth of Paul's spiritual sensitiveness? He could not get it out of his mind and conscience. Argue with Stephen—yes, Paul could, and may have done that. But to turn his back on this prayer, in the long run, proved to be impossible.

A PRISONER AND A PRAYER

Stephen was not the only Christian martyr whose name and death are known to Luke, the author of Acts. Chapter twelve opens with the words:

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[15] Acts 7:59, 60.
[16] Acts 8:1.

> About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.[17]

The apostle James who, together with his brother John, was especially close to Jesus, was slain by Herod's sword. Peter, too, was arrested by the king, who intended, no doubt, to kill him also. After recording the apostle's arrest, Luke notes that "earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."[18] The account of his imprisonment and dramatic deliverance is told with breath-taking realism. What concerns us most at this point, however, is the fact that the church prayed in this emergency and that their prayer and the apostle's release are presented as belonging together.

A point of special interest is that when Rhoda, the little girl in the home where the prayer meeting for Peter was being held, told the assembled company that Peter was at the gate, they replied, "You are mad," believing the visitor to be his guardian angel. And when Peter himself was admitted to the room, "they saw him and were amazed." We may well ask why they were thus surprised when their prayer was visibly answered. Before we allow ourselves to feel too self-righteous, however, we should remember that frequently we also rise from our knees without expecting life to be much different because we have prayed. Rather, we should feel strengthened, because we know

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[17] Acts 12:1-3.
[18] Acts 12:5.

that God has heard our prayer and that his wisdom and love are already at work in our behalf. We have made known our cause unto God, and he is personally concerned with meeting our need.

Peter's release from prison through prayer must not be interpreted as meaning that prayer will always bring daring and dramatic deliverance. Remember, the day came when, once again, Peter was in prison and, once again, prayer was made for him. This time, however, he became a martyr for the Faith. Does this mean that God did not answer the prayers of the church the second time? Not at all! God was doing what was best *all the way round* in both instances. We must not assume that God does not hear if our prayers are not answered as we desire them to be. Christian prayer begins and ends with the faith that in every situation God knows best.

We may long to understand God's response to our prayers on occasions when it seems to us mysterious, but we can learn to trust where we cannot know. The life that is based on this kind of trust grows deeper through the years, and, frequently, understanding comes along the way. We, in retrospect, often find that God's failure to answer our prayer according to our expectation has resulted in our greater blessing and his glory.

In any case, we may know the peace of a great faith, and such peace will see us through. Prayer in which we lay our problem before the Father, surrender to

him our hurt and confusion of soul, and take into our hearts the knowledge that he has heard us and will do what should be done—this kind of prayer brings poise and power into the life of the Christian.

III

THE CHURCH PRAYS AS IT GROWS

It is a mistake to assume that the church became a mature institution without having to go through the experience of growing up. When it began it had no organization, no meeting place of its own, no formulated Christian theology, no panel of officers, no official program, and no missionary commitments. One by one, these became a part of the life of the church as the demands of the situation which faced them required. Much experimentation went into this development, some mistakes, and a great many successes. There were misunderstandings and tensions, as well as unusual expressions of Christian love and brotherhood.

From the standpoint of our study, it is important to note that prayer played a part in the crucial decisions of the church during these early days. It should not be forgotten that the church is God's, quite as much as it is our own—in fact, more so. This fact delivers it from the fate of becoming just another social club. Without changing its spirit or religious value in the least we might follow the words of the Lord's Prayer, "thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory," with the further truth, "thine is the church!" Believ-

ing this, these early Christians sought God's guidance through prayer as they made new decisions or faced sudden emergencies in the fellowship of the brotherhood.

"BUT WE WILL DEVOTE OURSELVES TO PRAYER"

The importance of prayer during the formative days in the life of the church can be seen from the fact that "the twelve" felt it necessary to delegate some of their growing responsibility to others, in order that they might give their time wholly to praying and preaching. The care of widows and the poor proved to be a heavy undertaking, demanding thought and energy which should have been given to prayer and the ministry of the word. Therefore, seven deacons were selected to care for this sacred service:

> And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."[19]

The men chosen were ordained to this work by the laying on of hands and by prayer.

It would seem that the church today, honeycombed as it is with organization and boards, each of which makes strong demands upon the local pastor, would

[19] Acts 6:2-4.

do well to remember that the minister must have sufficient time for prayer and the proclaiming of the Word. Here is the intake of power and inspiration, and if we fail at this point, our institutional organization will collapse over our heads. Can we not be as wise as "the twelve," who, long ago, regarded the call to prayer and preaching as a special vocation, meant for them. In recognizing the province of their own calling and making a place for it, however, they did not neglect their social responsibilities, since they delegated this work to others.

PRAYER OPENS THE WAY FOR GENTILE CONVERTS

Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, much as the Wesleyan movement had its beginning within the Church of England. As we saw in the case of Peter and John, the first followers of Jesus continued to go to the temple to observe its set hours for prayer. Gradually, however, it became apparent that there were some irreconcilable differences between the Jews and the Christians, and as the breach widened between them, the new fellowship of believers in Christ became an independent body.

Along with the claim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and that his word was final authority, the attitude of the Christians toward Gentiles was an important element in the separation of Jews and Christians. The issue became so incendiary that even within

the Christian group itself there were differences of viewpoint.[20] The Law of Moses had regulated conduct for the Jews in this matter of association with Gentiles. As it was interpreted by the Scribes and Pharisees, the Gentile was regarded as inferior, and to associate with him made the worshipper ceremonially unclean.

In contrast to this racial snobbery, Jesus had associated with Gentiles freely. The hated Samaritan had become for him, on more than one occasion, an object lesson in faith.[21] Since, then, their Lord had freely moved among non-Jews, what attitude should members of the newly-found Christian church take toward them?

This was the question which troubled Peter, when invited to come to the home of Cornelius the Gentile centurian.[22] Already he had accepted the invitation to stay in the house of Simon the Tanner, a man who, because of his profession, was ceremonially unclean. Already this situation had given him some concern. And were it not for a vision which came to him on the housetop while he was observing the hour of prayer, doubtless he would not have made bold to visit the centurian. The sheet which he saw let down from heaven, filled with unclean meats, and the thrice-repeated command: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat . . . . .

[20] These differences resulted in the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, which decided on what terms Gentiles could be admitted into the church.

[21] Luke 4:16-30; 7:1-10.

[22] Acts 10:1 ff.

What God has cleansed, you must not call common,"[23] prepared Peter to receive the invitation of Cornelius and emboldened him to accept it.

But Peter was not the only one who had been praying. Cornelius also was in prayer when an angel appeared to him in a vision, telling him to send for Peter. When the Apostle arrived, the centurian told him of his vision, and Peter preached Jesus to this good man and his household. As they listened, they were so receptive that the Holy Spirit came upon them, *even though they were Gentiles,* just as at Pentecost, and Peter baptized them into the Faith.

Here is a startling example of how God works through prayer. Two people were available for his purposes because each of them was praying. Had Peter and Cornelius not been in prayer, their visions, in all probability, would not have come to them, and the chances are that the two of them would not have been able to surmount the racial barriers which separated them. As it was, prayer brought them together, and the coming of the Spirit into the life of Cornelius, a Gentile, opened the door to the evangelizing of the Gentile world.

When we realize that prayer provides an occasion for God to speak to us, we cannot but ponder the thought that our own Christian service might be more effective if we prayed more often. In the world of the Spirit, space is no barrier, and praying men can be brought together under the impulse of God's leading

[23] Acts 10:15.

to inaugurate great forward movements today, just as in the days when Peter and Cornelius were keeping the hour of prayer.

One word more: there are barriers of race and social caste today which keep Christians themselves from free fellowship with one another. The rich congregation and the poor congregation, the prominent denomination and the small sect, the highly educated and the unschooled—these groups are frequently kept apart in the modern church. It may be that if members of all groups prayed as did Peter and Cornelius, God could restore us to the true union of Christian brotherhood.

Helps for Study

1. Make a list of the situations presented in this chapter, under which the early Christians prayed.

   a) What was the need in each?

   b) What difference did prayer make in each?

2. Did the prayers considered in this chapter always lead to a vision? Did they, however, always result in power? Illustrate.

3. In the New Testament, prayer and the Holy Spirit are closely related. How does Acts 2:1-4, 4:24-31, and 10:30-48 bear this out? Can you point to any experiences in the present-day church, or in your own life which further illustrate this fact?

4. Which of the prayers studied contradicts the statement that men turn to prayer in order to run away from difficulties? For example, it should be noted that Peter had to defend his visit to Cornelius in open assembly, a visit in which prayer had shown the way (Acts 11:1-18).

5. The writer pointed to the practice of blindly opening the Bible, after a prayer for guidance, as an example of undesirable prayer because it stressed magic rather than thought. Can you suggest any other prayer practices similar to this one which are known to you? Would a prayer in which we insisted on having our own way be just as unspiritual as the casting of lots?

6. As you think back upon the prayers of the Old Testament worthies and compare them with these of the New Testament saints, what similarities and differences do you notice?

7. To what extent does the fact that Stephen addressed his prayer to Jesus bear witness to his faith in the resurrection? Would he have prayed to a dead Christ?

Chapter Six

THE PRAYERS OF PAUL

ANYONE who has tried to do his best and failed is in a position to understand Paul the Jew. In the same way, the person who, having known failure, discovers that what God expects of a man is that he love him fully and act sincerely, rather than that he succeed completely—such a one is in a position to appreciate Paul the Christian. The story of how Paul came to this realization, and of the energetic manner in which he sought to share his experience with the world in which he lived, takes up fully half of the New Testament.

Paul's conversion on the Damascus road brought Jesus into his life,[1] and it was from this experience that he moved out to rethink his ideas of God, prayer, and salvation. Here he learned that it is faith which re-

[1] Paul expresses it this way: "But when he [God] who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me. . . . . (Gal. 1:15, 16).

deems life, bringing man into union with God, and releases the power of the Spirit within his soul.

It is very easy to get lost in the tall grass of theological phrases in reading Paul unless we keep our eyes focused on the fact that he was doing his best to state in words of his own day and age what Jesus meant to him.[2] And, we might add, that it would help matters greatly today if the church would do the same, not copying Paul's phrases, but employing his technic in making plain to the people of our generation what Jesus can mean to them.

I

PAUL WAS A PRAYING MAN

Both the Book of Acts and Paul's letters show that this Apostle to the Gentiles was a praying man. He had learned to pray in his Jewish home, and now that he had become a Christian, he continued to pray. We do not have recorded any of the prayers which he offered before Jesus came into his life, but if you read his description of the futility and discouragement of these days,[3] you will conclude that there must have

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[2] A simple but suggestive dictionary of Pauline terms and phrases may be found in *Paul for Everyone*, by Chester W. Quimby (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946).

[3] Romans 7:24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

been lacking in them the notable accent of victory which characterizes his Christian prayers.

Hear him as he urges men to pray:

> Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.[4]

Again:

> Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.[5]

Consider, finally, these words written when Paul was in prison:

> Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.[6]

There is a note of triumph in his encouragements to prayer which could come only from the soul of one who had discovered through actual experimentation the power of prayer. This was, in the Betty Crocker style, a "tested recipe."

Some of the occasions on which Paul prayed are indicated by Luke in the account he wrote of the missionary journeys. He tells us that when Ananias was directed to go to the home of Judas, on the street called Straight, where Paul went following his conversion, he would find the apostle praying.[7] Likewise, Luke notes that Paul and Barnabas were selected to embark on the first definitely planned missionary journey of the Chris-

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[4] I Thess. 5:16-18.
[5] Rom. 12:12.
[6] Phil. 4:6.
[7] Acts 9:11.

tian Church, in a meeting where the brethren prayed and fasted.[8] At Philippi, where Paul and Silas had been beaten and put into prison, we find them praying and singing psalms at the midnight hour.[9] Their raw backs may have made sleep impossible, but not prayer and song.

Another dramatic scene, this time from the third missionary journey, is Paul's farewell to the elders at Miletus. Intimations of suffering and death plagued the apostle as he was returning to Jerusalem, and he spoke moving words to these church leaders in Asia, words which he believed might be his last to them. Luke says:

> And when he had spoken thus, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they all wept and embraced Paul and kissed him, sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more. And they brought him to the ship.[10]

At Tyre, later in this same journey, we are given the picture of another prayer service on the beach, as Paul touchingly bade farewell to the church there, including the wives and the children.[11] Other illustrations from Acts could be given of Paul's frequent recourse to prayer. These, however, are sufficient to show that it was a normal part of his experience as a Christian missionary, especially in the crisis hours, when faced with suffering, sorrow, and uncertainty.

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[8] Acts 13:2, 3.
[9] Acts 16:25.
[10] Acts 20:36-38.
[11] Acts 21:5.

II

PRAYERS IN PAUL'S EPISTLES

As a rule, one would not expect to find prayers in epistles to the churches, since these writings are not manuals of devotion. Paul, however, scatters prayers throughout his writings, in much the same way as God sprinkles the countryside with wildflowers in the spring.

The fact that prayers abound in Paul's letters is not so strange as it may seem when we realize that his epistles were not formal theological statements planned to be used as a basis of creed-making in the centuries yet unborn. They represent, rather, the warm personal correspondence between a missionary and his mission stations that he had opened in new territory where the church had not yet gone.[12] As he wrote, a procession of faces came before him, such as a mother sees when she writes to her children who have moved to distant cities. This use of imagination personalized his writing, and prayer became the natural expression of a loving heart.

Illustrations of the close personal relationship Paul had with the churches abound. To the Galatians he could say, "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"[13] The Thessalonians read in their letter from him such words

[12] The Letter to the Romans is an exception, for when he wrote it, there was a church in Rome which Paul had not founded.

[13] Gal. 4:19.

as, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."[14] In his writing to the church at Corinth he said, "I seek not what is yours but you; . . . . I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls."[15] In another passage, where Paul lists his suffering for the church, after pointing out many physical hardships, he turns to the subject of his loving concern for his converts. "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"[16] The point we are making in these references to Paul's affection for his own is that, feeling as he did about them, it was inevitable that he should pray for them in his letters, just as though he were present among them.

PAUL PRAYS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In praying for the Christians, Paul invariably put their spiritual progress in first place. In the words of our fathers, he had a "passion for souls." He saw in his converts a growing spiritual life and prayed that it might be nourished. In our day, the study of psychology of religion has turned our eyes inward to the developing self. We are greatly interested in the mental

[14] I Thess. 2:19, 20.
[15] II Cor. 12:14, 15.
[16] II Cor. 11:28, 29.

and emotional side of religious experience in our attempt to describe and analyze what is taking place in prayer and conversion. Paul looked inward, likewise, to the growth of the soul; not as a technical psychologist, to be sure, but with an understanding of the spirit of man that was incisive and revealing.

Listen to him as he prays:

> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.[17]

Paul knows that it is through faith that Christ dwells in our hearts, and that in order to have power and understanding we must be rooted and grounded in love. His goal for the believer is that he should be filled with all the fullness of God.

In this same vein Paul lifts his prayer for the Romans:

> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.[18]

These are great qualities of the soul for which Paul prays—joy, peace, power, and hope. He knows, too,

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[17] Eph. 3:14-19. The question of the authorship of Ephesians is not pertinent to a study of its prayers, which are characteristic of Paul's prayers elsewhere—in psychology, outlook, and content.

[18] Rom. 15:13.

from whence these come. They are present in the heart when the Holy Spirit is present. Paul does not discriminate sharply between the presence of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To him they are one spiritual reality, and the "fruits of the Spirit" are present when Christ is in the life of the believer.

Paul would be vitally interested in present-day religious education with its emphasis on experience and its concern for the growth of the soul. Along with a wise use of teaching technics, however, he would urge that teachers pray for the members of their classes, that the inner qualities of Christian character might develop within them. Such personal interest has always been characteristic of Christian teachers at their best.

PAUL PRAYS FOR KNOWLEDGE

It was not like Paul to substitute piety for knowledge. His own highly specialized education would make such an attitude impossible for him. Apart from this training, it is unlikely that he could have written such moving and effective letters. On the other hand, Paul believed that there was an inner spiritual knowledge which came to a man because the Spirit of God dwelt within him.[19] In his prayer for believers, he placed such knowledge high on the list of petitions. For example, in his prayer for the Colossians, he says:

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[19] Cf. Paul's seaching statement and exposition of this truth in I Corinthians 2:1-16.

> . . . . , we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.[20]

It was important that Paul stress "knowledge" when writing to these churches in Asia, for this was a popular subject among them at this time. Certain new-thought cults[21] were beginning to attract attention, and these claimed to possess occult knowledge by which a man might find "Life." It was necessary, therefore, to throw a spotlight on Christian "wisdom," if the church were to reach the people. Paul could not neglect the environment in which his churches stood, as he prayed, nor can we, if we do not want Christians to become an ingrown group without influence in our own generation. He knew this danger, and interpreted the meaning of Christ for the day in which he lived, thus making Christianity a vital influence. In stressing spiritual wisdom and knowledge he was doing just that thing. When we call this to mind, such words as appear in these prayers which follow have an added significance:

> I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his

[20] Col. 1:9, 10.

[21] These groups were called Gnostics (from the word *gnōsis*, meaning knowledge).

> glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might . . . .[22]

> And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ...[23]

We must not miss the fact that Paul made the issues of the environment in which he lived a subject for prayer. All vital questions of the day are proper concerns for the man who prays. For instance, the Assembly of United Nations and the rehabilitation of war-torn Europe should be objects of prayer for our church groups today. If Paul were alive in this desperate hour, he would proclaim the brotherhood of man in Christ with great vehemence.

PAUL PRAYS FOR THE BROTHERHOOD

In considering the prayers of Abraham, we noted that the patriarch was a great family man. So also was Paul. There was a difference between them, however, for whereas Abraham's family was limited to his kinsfolk, Paul's included the Christian brotherhood as a whole. He conceived of the family of God in sweeping terms. God is the "Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,"[24] and Paul envisioned these families as brought together in the body of

[22] Eph. 1:16-19.
[23] Phil. 1:9, 10.
[24] Eph. 3:14, 15.

Christ.[25] Since this is true, we would expect him to pray in the interest of the brotherhood as such, and he does. For the Romans, he prays:

> May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.[26]

Likewise, in his letter to Philemon, he prays that this Colossian Christian might share his faith with the church:

> I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ.[27]

This emphasis on the Christian brotherhood has a familiar ring in these days when much attention is being paid to denominational union. In our zeal for streamlining the church at this point, we may easily mistake such unification for what Paul had in mind when he prayed for the body of Christ. If we cooperated denominationally in the spirit of dedication to a common evangelical task, we would be answering Paul's prayer in our own time. It is brotherly love that constitutes true Christian union, not organizational identity. In fact, it would be possible to have complete institutional unity and not possess organic spiritual oneness.

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[25] Cf. I Corinthians 12:12-31 for Paul's treatment of the body of Christ.

[26] Rom. 15:5, 6.

[27] Philem. 1:4-6.

What is true of denominations is true, likewise, of local churches, made up, as they are, of many smaller groups, classes, and societies. Jealousies and special interests within the organization may break the unified impression of a church upon its community, so that it cannot fulfil its calling. Paul turned to prayer as a channel for realizing the cohesive love of God that binds men together. Every time we are tempted to speak a devisive word, instead, like Paul, we may offer a prayer for fellowship to the end that together we shall "with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."[28] This will help drain all selfish pride from our hearts, draw us closer to one another, and promote the Kingdom. An occasion which threatens to divide the brotherhood, may, if it becomes a challenge to prayer, unite it for more efficient service.

PAUL PRAYS FOR HIMSELF

We have already noted, in a general way, that Paul prayed for himself as he faced the problems of a traveling missionary. The Book of Acts makes this abundantly clear. In his letters to the churches this fact is also amply illustrated. We should not be surprised that his correspondence is very revealing when it comes to his personal life. His "gospel" was so deeply rooted in his own experience, that, when he wrote, there was no extracting of himself from the picture. Harris Franklin Rall expressed this fact succinctly in a recent volume when he said, " . . . . I would suggest that

[28]Rom. 15:6.

more, perhaps, than with any other great Christian teacher the man and the message were one with Paul. His insights were hard-won and life-tested."[29]

As in his prayers for the churches where their spiritual welfare was his chief concern, so in most of Paul's prayers for himself, the fulfilling of his call as a campaigner for Christ is the central theme. He represented himself to the Thessalonians as "praying earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith."[30] Then he prays:

> Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.[31]

Likewise, in writing to the Romans he made it clear that he was praying to God for an opportunity to visit them:

> For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, ...[32]

Such earnestness could not help binding the churches to him. There is wisdom in letting others know that you are praying for yourself and for them. Paul knew how to do this without appearing to be sanctimonious and

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[29]H. F. Rall: *According to Paul* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), p. 13. This book is recommended for further study in the thought of Paul.

[30]I Thess. 3:10.

[31]I Thess. 3:11.

[32]Rom. 1:9-11.

pious. Such great energy and personal sacrifice went into his service that he could not by any manner of means, be accused of sentimentality when he shared his prayers with others.

THE THORN

Of all the prayers of Paul, his petition to be delivered from the "thorn in the flesh" has been most used by God to help others. Unlike some writers in religion who share only their glowing victories and positive achievements, playing down their weaknesses, Paul did not hesitate to lay bare a problem with which he struggled throughout his active life. Without any fanfare or affected histrionics, he shared his experience with the Corinthians:

> And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.[33]

In this account Paul reveals his problem, the steps he took to meet it, and the answer that came to him through prayer. Whether the "thorn" was malaria, bad eyesight, epilepsy, or neurasthenia—all these have been suggested—there is no way at present of knowing. But whatever it was, it caused him no end of embarrassment

[33] II Cor. 12:7-10.

and considerable interference in his work. Three times, Paul says, he prayed to be delivered from the burden. The fact that he remembers praying about it "three times" suggests that these were special retreats for prayer.

At the close of Paul's praying to be delivered of his malady, the old condition remained unchanged, *but Paul himself was greatly changed.* Here was God's answer: a soul with new depths of insight and new power. Instead of removing the "thorn," God had cast a halo about it and used it himself to deepen Paul and to bless humanity down through the years. If Paul had not prayed about his problem, it would have remained a nagging, weakening burden. As it was, the Lord gave him strength to bear it and the grace to share it with others. It was as though God had placed a turbine at the hole in the dike, and the escaping waters, instead of undermining the area, were used to generate power and light for the community roundabout.

Once again we see that prayer becomes an occasion for facing up to life rather than an attempt to escape its hardships. It is a time for achieving new insights and profound understanding. We place ourselves and our situation before God, and together with him think, feel, love, and decide. Out of this experience a new self is created. This was what happened when Paul prayed to be delivered from the thorn in the flesh.

PAUL REQUESTS PRAYER FOR HIMSELF

It sometimes happens that Christian leaders give others the impression that they are perfectly willing to pray for them but that they themselves do not need to be prayed for. Such patronage is pharisaical, to say the least. Indeed, a part of what was wrong with the Pharisee in the parable of Jesus was that he felt that he was above the need of having the sinner pray for him. Paul did not succumb to such a superiority complex. He frequently asked the churches to undergird his ministry with prayer. For example, in writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says:

> Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph, as it did among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men; for not all have faith.[34]

Again, after speaking of a great deliverance and expressing his faith in God's presence in the future, Paul says to the Corinthians:

> You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers.[35]

Yet another example: while in prison and faced with the possibility of the death sentence, Paul wrote to the Colossians thus:

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[34] II Thess. 3:1, 2.
[35] II Cor. 1:11.

> Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison, that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak.[36]

In these requests for prayer Paul displays a quality of humility which is essential in effective prayer. He was humble not only before God, but also in the presence of the Christian brotherhood. He was not ashamed to take his place as one who was "standing in the need of prayer." Instead of lowering himself in the estimation of the church by admitting his need of its prayers, he bound the church all the closer to his side. The prayer level is a "common level" where all men are equal in the presence of God.

PRAYER WITH THANKSGIVING

When Paul advised the Philippians to be anxious for nothing but to let their needs be known to God in prayer, he added a significant phrase to the admonition: "but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* (italics mine) let your requests be made known to God."[37] Petition and thanksgiving are here joined, even as Paul had joined them in practice during his years of Christian service. Paul may have learned this practice from prayers of the psalmists who, as we have seen in a previous chapter, had suffused their prayer life with the perfume of praise and thanksgiving.

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[36] Col. 4:2-4.
[37] Phil. 4:6.

And what is it for which Paul is thankful as he prays? Let him tell us in his own words. He gives thanks:

> . . . . because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him. . . . .[38]
>
> . . . . because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.[39]
>
> . . . . because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.[40]
>
> . . . . for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.[41]
>
> . . . . because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, ...[42]
>
> . . . . because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.[43]

Even as Paul in his prayers for the churches had prayed for their growth in the faith, so now in his expressions of thanksgiving he gives thanks for the answers to these very prayers. The words of Rollin H. Walker are to the point when he says of Paul: "His prayer life was not in the minor key of perpetual plaintive begging, but in the major key of doxology."[44] Dr. Walker continues by pointing out that such expressions

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[38] I Cor. 1:4, 5.
[39] II Thess. 1:3.
[40] Rom. 1:8.
[41] Phil. 1:5.
[42] Col. 1:4.
[43] Col. 1:5.
[44] Rollin H. Walker: *Paul's Secret of Power* (Chicago: Abingdon Press, 1935), p. 126.

of praise are a faith-token of the fact that God would do even more in the days ahead.

In the praise-prayers of Paul a new note is added which takes him beyond similar prayers of the psalmists, for he can say, as they could not: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"[45] Christ is everything in his life. Paul's freedom from fear, victory over sin, release from a morbid conscience, and hope of eternal life had been placed into his hands by the risen Lord who led his followers in triumph. Jesus, then, is the explanation of the dominant accent of victory in Paul's prayers.

Helps for Study

1. Re-examine the prayers in this chapter to discover what place Jesus has in Paul's praying. Do the same thing with regard to the Holy Spirit.

2. If Jesus and the Spirit, together with the quality of life and outlook which come from them, were removed from Paul's prayers, what would you have left?

3. What difference would you say, then, that Jesus and the Holy Spirit made in the prayers of the New Testament Church, as compared with the prayers of the Hebrews recorded in the Old Testament?

4. As Paul did in writing to others, do you see any value today in telling them that you are praying for them—even sharing the nature of the petitions you are offering in their behalf?

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[45] Rom. 7:25.

5. Note that for Paul prayer was an instrument for evangelizing the world. It was not a means for satisfying personal whims and selfish desires. How do you think that the praying of the church today, by and large, measures up to the standard set by Paul?

6. Make a list of the things for which Paul prayed. Are they predominantly material in nature? Compare his petitions with those of Jesus in the Lord's Prayer.

7. In the following passages read the great benedictions in which Paul commends his followers to God: II Thessalonians 2:16, 17; 3:16; Romans 16:25-27; Ephesians 3:20, 21. Would you say that these are prayerful in spirit? How do they compare with the prayers of Paul already studied?

8. Have we progressed beyond Paul in effective prayer today, because of our increased knowledge in science and human psychology?

9. Is it easier for us to pray than it was for Paul, or more difficult?

10. What do you think that Paul would say to the modern man who sincerely inquires concerning the values to be had through prayer? Is not prayer an end in itself, and, as such, of greater value than those blessings that come *through* it when thought of, or used, as an instrument?

FULFILMENT

The story of the growth and development of prayer in the Bible may be compared to the rise and flow of a mighty stream. Beginning in the uplands of spiritual life with Abraham and the patriarchs, and continuing down through the valleys with the kings and prophets, the stream of prayer moved into the broad fertile plains where lived the psalmists of Israel. Along the sides of this waterway of faith, the Hebrew nation built its national life and constructed its civilization. In the crisis hours it drank deeply of the healing waters. Without the sustenance which these gave, Israel would have gone the way of Egypt and Babylon and have left only a record of an historical existence that could not sustain itself. As it was, the spiritual strength of the Hebrews survived the political eclipse of their nation, and Israel moved into the future as *a way of life,* carried along by the prayers of its saints.

In the New Testament, with the prayers of Jesus, the Early Church, and Paul, the stream grew even deeper. With a swift and triumphant current it drove its course into the Roman Empire, thence to Western Europe, on beyond the sea, into the New World, and finally into all lands.

The Christian Church today is dipping its cup into these same Spirit-filled waters. As prayer follows prayer, the very life of God is imparted to us, that we may meet our hour of decision with courage and wisdom. This is not an untried elixir of life; the centuries

have borne convincing testimony to its power. Indeed, the prayer-stream is one with "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. . . . .' "[1]

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[1] Rev. 22:1.

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